Inside Out by BrittWitt16

Category: Stranger Things, 2016
Genre: Friendship, Sci-Fi
Language: English
Characters: Eleven/Jane H., OC, Steve H.
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2019-08-11 00:07:36
Updated: 2019-12-15 00:56:06
Packaged: 2019-12-17 14:31:23
Rating: T
Chapters: 19
Words: 99,608
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: Christine Walcott cannot handle this. Between advanced science, boy drama, friend drama, and her very first hangover, she has enough on her plate. But sure. Let's add her nosy neighbor, his nerdy friends, one superpowered fugitive, and an alternate dimension of monsters and mayhem. Because life wasn't complicated enough. / Updates Sundays

1. The Horror House

November 4, 1983

By 8:00 PM, most of Hawkins, Indiana was getting ready to turn in for the night. Orange streetlamps buzzed faintly against the dark blue sky, kitchen lights turning off after dishes were washed, and the faint blue light of the television catching the curtains of some families' front windows. Cars were carefully stowed away for the evening, and children argued with their parents that they could stay up just a little bit longer.

But one house, at least, was still wide awake.

"Are you sure you've got everything?" a teenage girl asked, eyeing her father's suitcases.

"Pretty darned," he replied. He rounded the corner to the front room, dropping another bag into the pile so he could pull on his coat. "Suits are already in the car. Got my files, got my toothbrush…"

"Are you *sure*, Dad?"

"Christine, I'm a forty-year-old man. I know how to pack for a business trip."

"Right," she said with a curt nod, "and last time you just forgot your briefcase, so I had to hitch a ride to the airport to drop it off for you."

"Well, at least I won't make that mistake again, will I?"

He grinned at her until she broke. When her pout turned into a grudging smile, he tugged her forward to place a kiss into her blonde hair.

"Give me some credit. Kitchen is stocked, hotel number is on the fridge, Claudia is next door if you need anything, emergency funds are in the bread box, and the key to the liquor cabinet is in my 'I Heart New York' mug."

"Dad, I don't…"

"Ah, ah, ah!" He waved his hands vehemently, squeezing his eyes shut. "I don't want you to lie to me. Just promise me you'll drink responsibly."

"I'm serious, Dad. I don't…"

"Say it to make me feel better, come on. Please."

"Fine," she laughed. "Yes, I promise we'll drink loads, and we'll do it responsibly."

"That's my girl." He kissed her swiftly on the cheek and picked up his bags. "I'll be back next Monday. Call me if you need anything."

"I will. Love you, Dad."

"Love you too, bumblebee." He winked, and stuck his head around the corner to the living room. "Goodnight, girls! Give your parents my best!"

"Night, Mr. Walcott!"

"Have a safe flight!"

With one last pat on his daughter's head, he ducked out of the house and closed the door behind him.

Christine peered through the window, one hand ready on the doorknob in case he came running back to grab something. But her father climbed into the car and backed out without incident. She waved as he pulled onto the road, and then headed back into the living room to rejoin her friends.

"I love your dad," said Nancy from her seat on the floor. "He's just so…"

"Cool," Christine finished, rolling her eyes. "Yeah, we get it, Nance. You love my dad. You adore my dad. You are weirdly obsessed with my dad."

"Shut up! I didn't mean it like that." Barb snorted next to her, and Nancy's jaw dropped further. "I am not obsessed with her dad!"

"Sure," Barb said with a shrug. She picked another potato chip from the bowl and inspected it closely to avoid Nancy's death glare. "But you do bring him up literally every time we come over here."

"Why, thank you, Barb," said Christine smugly.

They cackled, watching Nancy blush furiously. Eventually, even she had to chuckle.

"I just think you're lucky to have a dad that's so understanding," she explained. "If I brought up drinking to my dad, I think he'd go into cardiac arrest."

"Uh, no," Barb corrected, "your mom would go into cardiac arrest."

"And then your dad would complain about the inconvenience on the way to the hospital," finished Christine.

"Exactly! They'd get crazy upset, and still somehow manage to make it all about them. It's ridiculous!"

"She's got a point," said Barb. "Your dad is pretty chill."

Christine waved a hand in defeat. "Ugh, fine, whatever. My dad's the bomb. Are we getting pizza or what?"

Nancy and Barb both raised their hands, and Christine retreated to the kitchen. As she plugged the number into the wall phone, she noticed a dark square sitting on the kitchen counter. She picked it up, flipping it open to review her father's driver's license, bank card, library card, assorted cash…

"Yeah, nice going, Dad," she mumbled, pinning the phone to her shoulder. "Sorry, hi! I was looking to place an order for delivery?"

She ordered their normal pies—one extra cheese, one pepperoni—and weighed the wallet in her hand. The easiest thing would probably be to ask Barb to drive her to the airport. If they were lucky, the might even catch up to her dad on the road. She'd have to

pay for the gas money, of course, but she could always take a few bills from the wallet…

Thankfully, it didn't come to that. She was just rattling off her address when a set of headlights pulled into the driveway. The car door slammed, pounding feet jogged up to the house, and her father tumbled through the front door.

"Sweetheart? Have you seen my…?"

Christine whistled, leaning around the corner to toss him the wallet. He grinned, gave her a small salute, and ducked out of the house once more.

This was standard routine at the Walcott house. Not that her father was particularly forgetful, or that Christine was especially organized. They just kept each other in check. The two of them had a system, and it had been that way for years. It was part of the reason she hated it so much when he had to go away.

She was getting better though. Every business trip was offset by a sleepover with her two closest friends. They gossiped, ate junk food, stayed up far too late, and watched movies they had no business watching before bed.

"I can't believe you made me bring this again," Barb complained, once they were settled in the living room with their pizza and sodas. She pulled a videotape out of her bag, and pushed herself up on her knees to insert it into the machine. "Can't we watch something new?"

"Hey, my house, my rules." Christine stretched out a leg to kick Barb in the butt, and Nancy giggled. "We watch comedies at your house, chick flicks at Nancy's. My house is the horror house."

"Yeah, I know," Barb sighed. She pressed a button, and the previews began to fly by on the screen. "I just don't get why you guys like horror movies. They're all skinny girls who don't know how to run and skeevy guys trying to get in their pants."

"They're not *all* like that," said Nancy. "I really liked *Jaws*."

"Right. The one with the skinny girls who can't swim, and the skeevy

guys trying to get in their bathing suits."

Christine threw a handful of popcorn at her, laughing when a piece got wedged underneath her glasses.

"Come on, Barb. That's the whole point!"

"What? That guys are dumb and girls are dumber?"

"No, that stupidity gets punished." Christine leaned against the seat of the couch, setting the popcorn bowl aside. "That's the whole thing that gets overlooked in horror movies. There's a structure to them. Skeevy guys, girls that sleep around, bullies, assholes—they're all first on the chopping block. If you don't do stupid shit, then you don't get killed."

"Oh, right," Nancy said with an exaggerated nod. "So you like horror movies because they make you feel better about being a virgin?"

"Um, yeah. Obviously. What about you, Nance?"

"Me? Definitely the blood. I just—I *love* watching massive amounts of gore. Totally."

"Funny," Barb snorted. "I thought you guys just liked this movie cause that one guy looks like Steve Harrington."

Nancy and Christine both squealed in protest.

"Oh my God, he does not!"

"Woah, hey, Jack looks *nothing* like Steve!"

"Right? You're so right!"

"Nothing! Absolutely."

They nodded at each other firmly in the silence, lips pursed in determination. Barb raised an eyebrow to meet her red curls. Nancy hesitantly pressed a hand over her mouth, trying to hold in her laughter, but the damage had already been done.

"Alright, except for the hair," she admitted, kicking Christine's leg.

"And the running shorts," Christine added with a wink.

Both girls dissolved into giggles, unhindered by their friend's unimpressed gaze. But the laughter was contagious, and after a few seconds even Barb was wiping her eyes and clutching her sides.

"Okay, okay," she wheezed, struggling to maintain her mature composure. "Let's just watch your dumb camp slasher."

"It's called *Friday the Thirteenth*, and it's incredible, thank you very much."

"Whatever, Chris."

Things settled down as they got into the movie. Christine had already seen it at least eight times since it had come out, but it was still thoroughly entertaining. She liked the anticipation in horror movies—not knowing who'd be next, when the killer would get them or how they were gonna go. But as the crowd of characters thinned out on screen, her interest began to drift. Nancy had tuned out the moment the boy named Jack had been stabbed in the throat, and Barb had been more interested in her pizza than the film since the title card.

Which brought the trio to the inevitable second phase of their sleepover.

"Nancy, truth or dare?" asked Barb.

Nancy swirled the remnants of her Coke around the bottle, deliberating before deciding, "Dare."

Barb smirked victoriously.

"Alright. I dare you to tell Christine who your *real* first crush was."

"Excuse me?" Christine gaped, as Nancy's jaw dropped.

"No! No, no, no! You can't use dares to force truths! That's against the rules!"

"Wait, your *real* first crush?" Christine repeated. "I thought it was Ethan Hart? That guy in my English class?"

"It was," Nancy insisted, as Barb shook her head.

"No, it was not."

"Who was it?" Christine demanded. "Nancy Wheeler, who was it?"

"I'm not doing this," Nancy laughed, shaking her head. "Nope, nope, nope!"

"Nancy, if you don't tell her I'm going to."

"Barb!"

"Who was it, who was it, who was it, tell me, tell me, tell me, tell me…"

"Shut up! Fine! It was Peter Jorgins!"

Nancy immediately buried her face in her hands as Barb and Christine erupted into laughter.

"Oh my God, *Peter Jorgins?"* Christine asked. "Isn't he the one who kept that Princess Leia picture in his wallet?"

"Yup," said Barb, nodding sagely. "Metal bikini and all."

"Ugh, I know," Nancy whined, peeking out between her fingers. "He wasn't always such a perv. This was back in like, first grade. Way before you moved here."

"Still, I'm hurt," said Christine, laying a hand over her chest. "It's like five years of friendship means nothing to you."

"Very funny. Truth or dare, Chrissy?"

"Fine. Truth."

Nancy narrowed her eyes, visibly mulling over a few ideas before breaking out into a smile.

"Alright. So you said horror movies have rules, right? Like if you hook up with someone then you have to die?"

"Yeah, and?"

"If you were in a horror movie, would you rather be a loner and survive the film, or make out with Steve Harrington?"

"Oof, brutal," said Barb, pointing at the girl across from her. "Good one."

Christine chewed on her lip, sagging back against the couch as she began her internal debate. It was difficult to push aside her daydreams of what it would actually be like to make out with King Steve Harrington—the most popular boy at Hawkins High School. She could easily spend all night thinking about it and never answer the question.

It was a stupid question, she knew—make out with one boy or not die? But still. Not every boy was Steve Harrington.

"Chrissy, you can't be serious," Barb said, after nearly a full minute of silence. "No guy is worth dying for. Not even King Steve."

"Well it's just making out, right?" Christine said meekly. "I mean, they couldn't *kill me* for making out with him. It's not sex."

"No way," said Barb. "You'd rather get chased by a crazy psycho with a knife than miss the chance to kiss Steve Harrington?"

"I can run pretty fast…"

Christine shrugged, and Nancy cackled next to her. She shook her long brown hair out of her face, fighting for breath as she held up a finger.

"Okay, wait, but what if you *did* sleep with him? Survive the crazy psycho monster, or sex with Steve?"

"Are you kidding me?" Christine laughed. "Have you heard the way Becky Dern talks about him? And they only dated like, a month. I'm pretty sure it would be worth it."

"So worth it," Nancy agreed.

They turned to Barb, who was watching them both skeptically. She rolled her eyes—her signature move—and grinned. "Well, I guess there are worse ways to go."

There was another round of giggles, and everyone helped themselves to second helpings of pizza.

"Anyway," Barb continued, "you're one step closer than the rest of us to finding out, Miss Advanced Placement."

"God, you're so lucky," Nancy sighed, downing the rest of her Coke. "I'm literally so jealous."

"There's nothing to be jealous of," Christine insisted, though she could feel her cheeks heating up. "I see Steve one period a day, two tops."

"But you're his lab partner! That's like, infinite opportunities to hang out. Lab questions, last minute reports, study dates…"

"I don't think it sounds that glamorous," said Barb. "Especially since he keeps slacking off."

Her disapproving face was back in place, making Christine defensive.

"He's been busy. I mean, between school and basketball practice…"

"Yeah? Well you've got a job."

"It's only been two reports," Christine reasoned. "And he really tries in class, so it's just the write up that I'm doing. Besides, I don't mind. I really like physics."

"Right. *Physics*."

Christine did her best not to let that sting. She knew Barb was just looking out for her. She was a classic realist, probably the most sensible, grounded person in their group. Still, her protective streak could be a real downer.

"Hey," Nancy said gently. "Maybe it's not Steve's fault, you know?

Maybe Chrissy's just hogging all the work for herself. She's a science hog."

"Excuse me?" Christine asked with a playful glare.

Nancy shrugged. "A science hog. That's why you're in upper placement, right? You just love science so much, and you want to do everything yourself. *You* are a big nerd."

"Right. This coming from the straight-A student."

"Hate all you want, but straight-A isn't upper placement."

"Of course not," Barb scoffed. "Just top of your class in English, and trigonometry, and chemistry…"

"Oh crap," Nancy sighed, all jokes forgotten. "We've got a chem test next week. I completely forgot."

"It's next week," said Christine, waving a hand. "You'll be fine."

"No, no—Mr. Kaminsky is like crazy hard. I swear half of the last test wasn't even on the review sheet."

"God, don't remind me," Barb groaned, and her head fell back toward the ceiling. "I actually had nightmares about the periodic table."

"Exactly. And I might have passed the last one, but I have got to seriously ace this test if I want to be on track this semester. My mom tried to have this whole heart-to-heart because it's not like me to just pass, or whatever, and…"

"Alright, okay, I get it," Christine laughed. She leaned over, patting Nancy's ankle. "But you're gonna do great, Nance. You always do. If you want, I'll help you study tomorrow, after I get off work. Promise. Just try not to worry about it for now, alright?"

Nancy bit her lip, glancing torn at the screen where the movie credits were still playing. She brandished a finger at Christine.

"Fine. But I'm serious, Chrissy, I need at least half an hour of flashcards."

"Deal. Until then—Barb, truth or dare?"

"Truth."

"Who was *your* real first crush?"

The living room filled with laughter once more, and they settled back into their lighthearted game. Worrying could wait for another day. For now, all they had to worry about was being teenagers—watching movies, eating junk food, and talking about love and music and movies until they fell asleep on the floor.

A/N: Thank you so much for taking the time to read this chapter and note. Welcome to any new readers, and welcome back to any returning. Before anyone gets concerned, this story is not replacing my Supernatural story *Gospel of the Chosen.* I simply like being able to publish every week, so I whipped this up to post while I'm writing for Kat.

Inside Out will update every **Sunday**. This story is **rated T**, mostly for language, underage drinking and descriptions of science-fantasy violence. Nothing will be above that seen on Stranger Things, but if a chapter contains anything I consider to be especially sensitive, I will add a **trigger warning** at the beginning of the chapter. If there's anything specific you feel should be tagged, please let me know. For visual aids, playlists, and additional content, you can visit this story's tumblr page at insideoutstory.

I'm so excited to finally be able to share this story with you all. I've been working on Christine for about three years now, and the first installment is finally, finally complete. I cannot wait to hear what you all think. Thank you again!

-Brittney

2. All The Right Moves

Saturdays at The Hawk were brutal.

Christine just wanted to be able to enjoy her weekends, to kick back and relax like most of her classmates. But no. She'd decided to be *responsible*. She'd wanted to have pocket money. She'd wanted to continue her summer job and work weekends at the movie theater. What a dumbass idea that had been.

She knew she shouldn't complain. She had the opening shift today, which was a lot easier than closing late at night. But her body was still aching from sleeping on the floor, and she felt a bit queasy after gorging on pizza and soda. So she wasn't in the most spectacular mood.

A handful of people piled out into the lobby, laughing and chatting as they fled into the afternoon sun. Christine watched them go with envy. Then she grabbed her broom and headed into the musty darkness of the empty theater.

She flicked the lights back on and began her cursory sweep of the aisles. There wasn't too much damage. One forgotten sweatshirt shoved down in the seats, some inevitable popcorn collateral on the floor. Matinee shows were light on customers and light on damage. At least she wouldn't have to break out the mop.

For a moment she glared at the screen, where the credits of *All the Right Moves* were rolling for the third time that day.

"Hey, Joey!" she called up to the projectionist booth. "Could you turn it down, please? Movie's over, bud!"

But it was no use. Joey was either asleep, or skiving off on his break until the next showing started in an hour. "Blue Skies Forever" continued to blare from the speakers, only adding to her current headache. Once or twice it sounded fine, but in a tiny theater that only ever showed one or two movies a month? She was starting to really hate that song.

Christine had no choice but to tune it out and slip into her normal routine. After cleaning the theater, she took the garbage out to the dumpster in the side alley. After that, she did a bathroom check, cleaning the pools of soap and water off the counter and picking stray toilet paper off the floor. Another trip to the dumpster. And after she thoroughly sanitized herself and swept the lobby, it was back behind the counter to pop a new batch of popcorn for the next showing.

She plopped back into her folding chair, cracking her neck and pulling her physics textbook from her backpack. They were just wrapping up a new unit in class, which meant there was another lab report due on Monday. She was almost done, but there were still a few things she needed to crosscheck before wrapping up her final confusion.

She'd meant what she said to the girls the night before. She did like physics; she liked all science, really. It had always been her best subject, even before she'd moved to Hawkins. And she'd moved *a lot* as a kid. In her other schools, she'd been placed in special programs, advanced track classes that taught outside of the normal curriculum. But Hawkins was a small town, and a very small school. That's how she'd ended up in "upper placement"—which was just a fancy way of saying she'd skipped a year in science. It had been tough at first, taking one class at the high school when she spent the rest of her day at the middle school, but they'd made it work. And honestly, it was her favorite part of the day.

Christine was so wrapped up in her assignment that the first few times the door opened, she barely looked up. Joey was back from break, handling ticket sales at the door. No one was going to bother her unless they needed snacks, which most people snuck in anyway. She sold a few bags of popcorn, a few sodas, and went right back to her homework.

Until the door opened again, and an all too familiar voice floated to her ears. A siren went off in the back of her brain, and Christine's head snapped up faster than a rocket.

There was Tommy H and Carol, arms slung around each other and leading the way into the lobby. It should have been Carol she heard first—with her loud voice and louder laugh. Carol demanded

attention, demanded to be heard, even before she had anything to say.

Tommy was just as bad, if not worse. He wasn't as loud, be he always had his two cents to put in. Usually something aggressive or pervy. It was fascinating to watch him with Carol, though. They'd been going out for years, as long as Christine could remember anyway. They were so in sync it was almost unnerving, moving together like some sort of conjoined boss monster in a video game.

Nicole followed behind them, a skewed reflection of Carol. She had the same bright red hair, the same sharp eyes, but she was stretched a little taller with curls that wouldn't lie just right. She was quiet, even by normal standards, but it was the unsettling kind where you could tell she knew too much. Nicole knew how to tap into the best gossip in town, and she was observant to boot. That was part of the reason everyone wanted to be on her good side. The other part was her parents' fancy lake house near Chicago.

And right at the back, last through the door, was Steve Harrington. He pulled her attention like a magnet, chuckling lowly at something Tommy had said. Somehow his laugh carried all the way across the lobby. Or maybe she was just so familiar with the sound that her brain was filling in the gaps. He grinned at Joey as he bought his ticket, offering some small high five. God, he was just so pretty…

And then they were moving toward her counter.

Christine panicked, slamming her textbook shut before she realized that would have been the best excuse to pretend she hadn't been staring at them. She hurriedly packed her things away, trying to make herself look busy and yet also available. It was rude to ignore them, but for some reason she couldn't bring herself to acknowledge them before it was absolutely necessary. It felt like it shouldn't be allowed.

"Hey," said Tommy, rapping his knuckles on the counter. Even though she'd known he was there, the sound still made Christine jump. "Four popcorns and four Cokes. And some Bottlecaps."

Carol snorted, and elbowed him in the ribs.

"Please," she added with a smile. But the expression was so predatory, Christine wasn't sure if it made her feel any better.

"Uh, yeah. Sure, just uh…"

When the rest of the sentence wouldn't come, she quickly turned her back on them. It took some self-control not to bury her head in the popcorn machine and wait for them to leave, but she did her best. She didn't even spill any of the popcorn before it made it to the counter. She got all four Cokes, and even unlocked the candy compartment without a problem, all before Steve walked up to the counter.

"Oh, hey Christine," he said, peering down at her over the glass. "Shit, I always forget that you work here."

Christine looked up, dazzled by the very real smile Steve was sending her way. Words suddenly seemed very distant, so she stuck to nodding and smiling. She grabbed a box of candy and stepped up to the register, only for Tommy to snicker across from her.

"Actually, I said I wanted Bottlecaps."

"Hm?" She stopped, looking down at the box of Gobstoppers in her hand. She was very lucky all the curse words she knew stayed inside her head. "Right. Sorry. Um…"

Tommy, Nicole and Carol all giggled as she swapped out the candy, but Steve just kept on smiling. He even had the nerve to lean his elbows on the counter, running a hand through his hair, as if her job wasn't already impossible to complete.

Christine typed everything into the register and cleared her throat, but Tommy was already sliding her the bills. "Yeah, just keep the change."

"Uh, sure. Thanks, Tommy."

He winked at her, which was followed by another indelicate snort from Carol, and a half-hearted smile from Nicole. "See ya, *Christine."*

Tommy clapped Steve on the back as they grabbed their bags and

headed for the door, but Steve waved him off.

"No, go ahead. I'll meet you in there. Go on."

And as if the situation couldn't have gotten worse, Tommy grumbled as he and the girls proceeded into the theater—leaving Christine alone with Steve. She was painfully aware of how hot her face was, sure it was bright red under her blonde hair. Hair which was currently pulled back into a haphazard ponytail so it didn't get into the popcorn, or stuck in the stupid clip-on bowtie she wore with her uniform.

She took her sweet time arranging the bills in the cash register, if only to avoid Steve's eyes. She hardly noticed that Tommy had shorted her on the bill. Not that there was anything she could do about it now, anyway.

"Tough day?" Steve asked with a small laugh.

It was amazing how much softer his voice was when he was alone—when it was just the two of them. It almost made it easier to look at him. He smiled encouragingly, his eyes earnest under that head of perfectly tousled chestnut hair. And Christine managed a shrug.

"Not too bad."

"Cool, cool." He nodded, and she watched as his hair bounced along. "I imagine it's gotta be pretty sick working here. Free popcorn, free candy, watching new movies whenever you want."

"One movie," she corrected with a tight smile. "On repeat. All day."

"What?" He gasped, his jaw dropping comically. "You mean you—you don't want to watch *All the Right Moves* ten times a day? You—Oh. Oh shit. I think I better ask for my money back."

She did her best not to giggle. She failed instantly and horribly, and had to duck her head in case it made her look stupid. A hand covered half of her face, but when she looked up, Steve was smiling proudly.

"Come on," he said conspiratorially, and leaned further of the counter. "What is the absolute worst part about working here?"

Christine bit her lip, willing herself not to look away. Casually as she could, she leaned forward on the counter, mimicking his posture.

"Honestly? The cleaning. People are slobs, and they will find a way to spill anything you give them."

"Well that can't be too bad, right?" he asked innocently. "It's just some popcorn."

"Ha, no. It's popcorn soaking in warm soda that's been on the floor for two and a half hours."

Steve's face wrinkled comically in disgust, and Christine had to hide her face again as she laughed.

"Ugh, gross. Well, let me apologize on behalf of everyone in Hawkins, Indiana, for the…disgusting swamp you have to clean up every weekend."

"Very noble," said Christine, shooting him a side glance.

He puffed out his chest, raising a non-too-humble hand with a proud smirk that made Christine feel like combusting into flames. She tucked a stray piece of hair behind her ear, and turned away to find a distraction. Without much hope, she grabbed a stray rag and began picking at stains on the counter.

Still, Steve stayed planted where he was. He ran a hand over his hair again, and ducked determinedly into her line of vision. "So, how long are you stuck here for?"

"Oh, I—uh…" She glanced at the wall and struggled to juggle some very simple numbers in her head. "Only another hour."

"Aw," he said with the most adorable pout. "Guess you won't be here when the movie gets out."

"Uh, yeah. They uh…they schedule us that way on purpose, you know. So that we're not switching during customer rushes. It's easier to leave when…yeah…"

She was going to punch herself as soon as she got home. Why was

she telling him this? Why was she still talking?

"Smart move," Steve said in amusement. "Well, I just wanted to thank you for all your help with physics. I mean, with basketball practice starting up and my parents on my case—I feel like I haven't had time to breathe, you know?"

"No, yeah I—I totally get it," she assured him, nodding frantically. "It's cool."

Somewhere in the back of her mind, Barb's voice groaned in frustration. It was a weak excuse. He couldn't find the time to write one paragraph for class? But then Steve turned his head, and his smile was so sweet that Christine forgot how to be angry at all.

"God, I'm so lucky to have you as a lab partner," he said, crossing his arms on the counter. "You're like my saving grace in that class."

Her brain was stalling. She couldn't think of anything to say, not while he was watching her so carefully. Instead she grimaced, awkwardly waving off his praise with the rag. He chuckled, and still stood there, grinning away.

Christine wasn't sure what made her do it. Maybe the voices of her friends in her head had gotten to loud, or the lack of sleep was catching up to her brain. But one minute she was twisting the rag in her hands, and the next the words were tumbling out of her mouth.

"You know, if—if you think that you really need help in physics, I could always like…like, I don't know, help you study or something. If you wanted. I mean, I know you have to keep your grades up cause of basketball, and your parents or whatever—or just in general, I guess, um…so if you ever wanted to meet at the library or something and…just go over some notes or reports or something, that…it could be…we could always do that…"

It was a train wreck. She wasn't sure she could have done worse if she was trying to bomb out. And there was absolutely nowhere for her to go. She was trapped behind the counter, completely at Steve's mercy as he looked up at her with a Cheshire grin. He looked endlessly amused by her discomfort.

"Sorry," she said, taking a few steps back. "That came out wrong. I just meant that…"

"No, no, no! It's fine," he laughed, waving his hands. "No, you're… probably right, actually. I know I need to study more. My grades are pretty…yikes…"

Christine bit her lip. She took the chance to peek up at him from under her lashes. "So…?"

Steve considered her for a moment, running a thumb over his bottom lip. The fingers of his other hand drummed against the glass. It didn't make her any less anxious.

"Christine," he drawled, narrowing his eyes at her. "When was the last time you took a break?"

"A…A break?"

"Yeah. It's when you stop working and have a little fun for a change. You know? Fun?"

He threw some jazz hands at her, and Christine rolled her eyes. "Yeah, thanks, Steve. I know what fun is."

"You sure?" he asked. "I mean, you're a straight-A student, you're in an advanced science class, weekends you spend all your time herding cattle here. As far as I can tell, all you do is work and study."

Christine crossed her arms over her chest. "I know how to have fun."

Steve raised his eyebrows. He was smirking again, challenging her, and it was enough to make her stomach twist into a pretzel. But she held her ground. She met his gaze evenly, and mirrored his defiant expression. It just made his smirk widen.

"There's a party tonight," he said, breaking the standoff. "Jenny Fischer's house, eight o'clock. Her parents are in New York visiting her brother, so it's gonna be rad. You should come. Let loose for a change, bring some friends."

"I should…?"

She could hardly believe what she was hearing. The words must not be processing. He wasn't actually inviting her to a party. This wasn't real. Steve Harrington was not inviting her to a party. It wasn't happening. But there he was, grinning up at her like anything, looking as serious as she'd ever imagined.

"So…So what?" she scoffed, shaking her head. "I just show up to someone else's house with all of my friends?"

"Well, not *all* your friends," Steve conceded. "I mean, it's not my house. But consider this your invitation plus one. What about that girl you're always hanging out with in the hall? Uh, Nancy? She could come."

Christine chewed her bottom lip. She wanted to go. Of course she did. But there was something about it all that still seemed too good to be true. Was Jenny Fischer really having a party? Would they really be allowed to join in? Or would they be turned away at the door while Tommy and Carol snickered like a pair of gargoyles? Or worse, would they show up to find there was no party at all, and the whole thing had just been a huge prank?

"Come on," Steve said cajolingly. "It's one party. And I, for one, would really like to see you there."

Well. That had done it.

Christine released her bottom lip, her face splitting into a smile so wide it was almost painful.

"Okay. Sure. I mean—Fine. I'll think about it. Yes."

"Alright! That's my girl!" He grinned, and glanced up at the clock on the wall. "Well, now it's only fifty-five minutes until you're out of here, so I guess I'll see you later."

"Maybe," Christine corrected.

Steve pushed off the counter, taking a few steps backward. "Exactly. So I'll see you later, Chrissy."

He grabbed his snacks, heading into the theater with his perfect head

held high. She called him back at the last moment.

"Hey, Steve?"

"Yup?"

"Just…um…try not to spill your popcorn."

Steve winked, clicked his tongue, and then disappeared into the theater.

The fog in her brain didn't clear for another few seconds. She'd been so hyped up on adrenaline trying to survive the conversation, she hadn't fully considered the ramifications. But now there was clear air to breathe, it was coming back to her. She'd tried, and failed, to ask out Steve Harrington. And then, instead of cackling or hollering or rolling on the floor, he'd asked her out to a party instead. Steve Harrington had just asked her out.

It was as if all the dopamine that had just drained out of her system started filling her from the bottom up all over again.

Christine bit down on her knuckle, holding in the girly squeal that was desperate to burst from her chest. There were still people in the lobby. They were giving her strange looks. She still had fifty-five minutes on the clock. Fifty-four, fifty-three…

For once, the rest of her shift seemed to fly by. She busied herself scrubbing the countertop, rearranging the candy boxes until they were all straight as a pin, and restocking everything that could possibly be restocked from the back closet.

The moment the second hand finished its final lap around the clock, Christine was sprinting out the door into the alley. She threw on her backpack and catapulted herself onto her bike, zooming into traffic as fast as her frantic legs could carry her. It didn't matter that she was still in her work clothes, or that cars were honking at her for veering too far into the road. Time was of the essence.

She zoomed down the residential streets, and took a hard turn into a driveway that nearly sent her toppling off the bike. She hopped off gracelessly, and tripped over her own sneakers as she ran up to the

front door. Forgetting her patience, she jabbed at the doorbell, then knocked rapidly against the door. Then she pressed the doorbell again for good measure.

A few moments later, the door swung open to reveal a very worried Karen Wheeler.

"Who—Oh! Chrissy, sweetheart. I didn't know you were coming over today."

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler," Christine panted, still beaming. "Is Nancy in her room?"

"Well, yes, but…"

Not waiting for an invitation, Christine darted into the house, making a beeline for the stairs and taking them two at a time.

"Well, hold on!" Mrs. Wheeler called after her. "Where's the fire?"

"No fire! Just chemistry! Lots of chemistry! Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler!"

Christine careened onto the second landing, nearly colliding with Nancy's younger brother as he poked his head out of his room to investigate the commotion.

"Hey, watch it!" he snapped, jumping back against the wall.

"Hey, Mike! Sorry! You're great! Bye!"

She barely registered his baffled expression as she darted past him, wrenching Nancy's bedroom door open and then slamming it shut behind her.

Nancy, as she could have guessed, was settled on the end of her bed, surrounded by her schoolwork. Textbooks were laid open, unit packets flipped to various pages, and highlighters littered the sheets. She jumped as the door slammed, clutching her chest and knocking a stack of index cards onto the floor.

"Jesus! Christine! What the hell?"

Nancy was glowering, but Christine couldn't bring herself to care.

"Oh my God! You are not going to believe! You're just not gonna believe! Oh my God!"

She held her face in her hands, pacing back and forth at the end of Nancy's bed. She wanted to scream, she wanted to jump, she wanted to cheer—but she knew that would alert Nancy's parents, and the Wheelers would *definitely* not be cool with the truth.

"Christine, slow down," said Nancy as she clambered off the bed. She grabbed Christine by the shoulders, forcing her to stand still. "Breathe, okay? You're not making any sense."

Christine nodded, taking a deep breath. "Okay, okay. Guess who came to The Hawk today?"

Nancy stared at her. In an instant, the concern was gone and the annoyance was back.

"Seriously, Chrissy? I am about to bomb this test. This is important. I have to…"

"No, no, no, no, no, no, no!" This time Christine grabbed Nancy, locking her in place before she could bury herself in schoolwork again. "Guess who came to The Hawk and had a full, complete conversation with me?"

"That's great," said Nancy, rolling her eyes. "Can we talk about Steve later? You know, *after* you help me study?"

She freed herself of Christine's grip, picking up her index cards and settling back onto her bed. There were already about thirty cards written out, and she was still finding more to jot down. If nothing else, you had to admire her dedication.

Christine sighed dramatically, leaning back against the unoccupied desk. She dropped her backpack on the floor and started shedding her work uniform.

"Fine. I guess that means you don't want to know who invited me to Jenny Fischer's party tonight either."

The silence that followed was sweeter than she'd imagined.

"What?" Nancy demanded in a low voice.

"No, it's fine," said Christine. She shrugged as she fished a fresh T-shirt out of her bag. "It can wait. I mean, we kinda have somewhere to be at eight o'clock, but it's totally cool. Let's talk about molecular structures."

"Oh my God!" Nancy put the cards aside, pushing herself onto her knees. "Christine, if you are joking right now, I swear to God I will kill you."

"Nance, I am not that funny. Steve and everyone came to the movies, I—God, I made an absolute idiot of myself. Can you believe I tried to ask him out?"

"What?" Nancy squealed. "And he said yes?"

"No! I completely bombed out. Told him we should study together at the library. But instead of making fun of me, he told me I should come to Jenny's party later to loosen up."

"Loosen up?" she repeated with a smirk.

Christine threw her button-down in Nancy's face.

"Not like that," she laughed. "Apparently all I do is work, and I don't know how to have any fun."

She tugged on her tee and finally pulled her hair out of its stupid ponytail. Then she flopped down onto the end of Nancy's bed, finding the narrow strip of blanket that was not covered in papers.

Nancy was smiling sweetly. "Christine, that's amazing. You're gonna have so much fun."

"Well, you're coming with me, right?" Christine asked, propping head up on her elbow.

"Oh, no. No, I'm seriously worried about this test, and…"

"Nance…"

She sighed, and Christine noticed how sad her smile looked. "He asked you out, Chrissy. Not me."

"He invited me to someone else's house party, where there's gonna be like forty people. It's not exactly a marriage proposal."

"Still, this—this could be huge for you. I don't want to mess that up."

Christine stared at her friend, watching as Nancy shuffled through her completed flash cards. She was touched, of course, but also a little disappointed. This wasn't how she'd imagined the conversation going at all.

She poked Nancy on the knee. Then she did it again, and again, until she finally looked up.

"What?"

"He asked about you, you know."

"No, he did not."

"Yes, he did. He told me that I should bring a friend, and immediately suggested you. He's expecting to see both of us there."

"Still…" she sighed.

"No." Christine pushed herself up, crossing her legs and sitting knee-to-knee with Nancy. She pushed the index cards aside, and grabbed Nancy's wrists. "Look, you cannot leave me alone with these people. I've never been to a party before, and I've never been drunk, and I know that at some point Tommy's gonna bring up something embarrassing I did like two years ago, and everyone's gonna laugh, and I'm not gonna know what to say even though I've been worrying about it all day. I need you there, Nancy. I need you."

Nancy pursed her lips, but did not respond. Apparently, the sentimental best friend card was not going to be enough. So Christine started waving Nancy's hands around, swinging them back and forth wildly until the other girl finally broke out laughing.

"Okay, even if I did want to go," she conceded, "my parents aren't going to let me out of the house. I slept over last night. I can't do two nights in a row, especially when they know your dad's not home."

"Alright, so you don't stay over," said Christine. "We say we're going back to my place so you can look at my notes from last year, we'll get ready, and then we can walk to Jenny's. It's only a couple of blocks. We can figure out the rest later."

"Yeah, easy for you to say. You dad isn't waiting at home with the light on."

"Fine, fine. You want a battle plan? Just tell your parents you got caught up studying and it's already past Barb's curfew. They can pick you up, or let you stay at my house."

"I'm still going to be in trouble."

"I thought you said Steve Harrington would be worth it?"

There was a stare-off. Nancy narrowed her eyes, floundering between her desire to be right and her desire to live out her dream. Christine did not budge. Nancy was stubborn as hell, but somewhere under that cardigan there was a rebel. All Christine had to do was wait her out.

Finally, Nancy dropped her gaze. Her smile was hidden under a curtain of hair. She closed her textbook with satisfying finality, and Christine beamed.

"God, I don't have anything to wear."

"Bullshit," Christine laughed. "A, you look great in everything, and B, I know you went shopping with Barb this morning."

"God," Nancy sighed, "have you told her yet?"

"Nope. I got off work and came straight here."

Nancy leaned over, grabbing the phone from her bedside table. She handed the receiver to Christine, and was halfway through dialing the Hollands' phone number when the door swung open. Mrs.

Wheeler popped her head into the room.

"Mom!" Nancy complained. "Knocking?"

"Sorry," said Mrs. Wheeler, more amused than apologetic. "Christine, are you joining us for dinner?"

"Oh, um… Thanks, Mrs. Wheeler, but…"

"Actually, we were going to go to Chrissy's house to study," said Nancy. "We'll just eat there."

"Uh, I don't think so," said her mother, a hand on her hip. "You stayed over last night, Nancy. I'd like you to stay home for once."

"Mom! I really have to study for this test! And Christine has all of her chemistry notes from last year. She promised she'd quiz me."

"And she can quiz you. Right here."

"I totally get it, Mrs. Wheeler," Christine placated. "I just wanted to go over what my test was like last year, so Nancy could get a better idea of what Kaminsky's looking for. I save all my old tests in a folder at my house."

"Exactly," Nancy agreed. "Please, Mom? This test is super important."

Mrs. Wheeler sighed. "Fine. But after dinner. I don't want you having pizza two nights in a row. And that's final."

She raised a finger when Nancy opened her mouth, cutting off any complaints. Then she smiled, and closed the door once more.

"We're so going to be late," Nancy groaned.

"It's fine," said Christine. "No one shows up to a party on time anyway. At least, that's what I've heard."

Nancy laughed, and turned her attention back to the telephone.

To say Barb was excited about the news would have been an understatement. Christine and Nancy had to hold the receiver

between them to talk, but they easily could have heard Barb's squeal from the other side of the room. She'd offered to drive them to the party, even if she didn't go herself, but Christine refused. They were going to waste Barb's gas by having her chauffer them around the neighborhood. Jenny's house wasn't too far from Christine's, so it wouldn't be a problem.

They couldn't stay on the line long, just in case one of Nancy's parents picked up the phone and overheard them. But Barb wished them both good luck and told them to call her the moment they got home. After that, Nancy went through her entire wardrobe for the perfect outfit, while Christine quizzed her with the flash cards. She didn't get a single question wrong.

An hour later, Mrs. Wheeler called them down for dinner. Nancy often complained about eating dinner with her family, but Christine always thought it seemed kind of nice—everyone around the table together talking about their day. She and her father rarely bothered using the dining room table, even when they were both home. They mostly ate take out anyway.

"So Christine," Mrs. Wheeler said once they were all seated, serving out the beef stew she'd made. "How's your father?"

"He's good," she answered politely. "He left for Atlanta last night, so he'll be at a work conference for the week."

"Must be nice," said Mr. Wheeler, somewhat wistfully, "being able to travel. Farthest the office will pay for me to go is Indianapolis. Huh."

"Still," said Mrs. Wheeler, shaking her head. "I can't believe he leaves you alone for so long. I can't imagine leaving the kids to fend for themselves for a week."

"We'd be fine," said Mike through a mouthful of stew.

His mother shot him a sour look. "Thank you, Michael. Glad to know you're so appreciative."

Mike simply shrugged.

"Hey, Mike," said Christine. "How's Mr. Clarke doing? You still have

him for science?"

"Yeah, he's fine," Mike answered. "We've got a test next week on cell division. Pretty easy stuff."

"Which you've studied for?" Mrs. Wheeler asked, glancing over from where she was feeding her youngest daughter, Holly.

Mike rolled his eyes. "Yes, Mom."

"How's AV club?" asked Christine.

That made him light up.

"AV club's great. Mr. Clarke ordered a new Heathkit model that just came out this year. Solid state, hundred watt, WARC bands—we just need to get a DSP."

"Oh my God, I heard about that," Christine gushed. "The HW-5400, right? I'm super jealous."

"Can we speak English at the table?" Mr. Wheeler complained.

"We're getting a new radio," said Mike, carefully enunciating each word. "And it's way cooler than Chrissy's was."

"Michael, don't talk back to your father."

"Whatever."

"Am I allowed to come see it?" asked Christine. "One AV club president to another?"

"We'll discuss it," he said haughtily. "I'll let you know when the party decides. We get first dibs, though."

"Obviously."

"Weren't you like, the only person in AV club?" Nancy asked, smirking.

"No! There was Charlie Chester, Felicity Bex…"

"Will's brother used to be in it," Mike offered. "Jonathan?"

"I guess, yeah." Christine barely managed to contain her scoff. "He didn't show up a lot, though. Only when we had new equipment to play with. I don't think he liked hanging with us too much. Then he ditched us for the art department."

"Will says Jonathan is pretty cool," said Mike.

"Yeah, well, he's Jonathan's little brother. He has to say that."

"I don't tell anyone that Nancy's cool."

"Shut up!"

"Hey, that's enough you two!"

Mrs. Wheeler glared, brandishing her fork at her children in turn. Both of them pouted, but reluctantly held their tongues.

"Now," she continued, ruffling her shoulders, "if it wasn't Jonathan Byers, Christine, may I ask what boy had you ready to break down my front door this afternoon?"

"Mom!"

"I am allowed to ask," Mrs. Wheeler said innocently. "You can make all the excuses you want, but I have never seen a teenage girl move that fast in the name of science. There's only one thing that can make a girl that happy."

"You do not have to answer that," said Nancy, rolling her eyes at Christine.

"No, it's—it's fine," she said quietly. She shifted under the weight of Mrs. Wheeler's intense gaze. It was a little unnerving. "Um, a guy came to the theater to visit me today. Just someone from my physics class."

Mike made an obnoxious gagging sound across from her, while his mother gasped in delight. "Ooh, a junior? That's exciting."

"Not really," Christine insisted with a shrug. "He just wanted to borrow some notes. Nothing important."

Mrs. Wheeler pouted, and looked about to comment when her husband set down his silverware in annoyance.

"Are we done with the teenage gossip? I'd like to eat my dinner in peace, thank you very much."

"Hmph." Mrs. Wheeler glared at him, but plastered on a compliant smile. "Of course, Ted. I'm sorry."

The table lapsed into silence. It was a bit awkward, but Christine was glad the questioning was over. That was one benefit of life with her dad; there wasn't such an audience.

Nancy nudged her under the table, and they quickly shared a smile. The worst part was over. Soon they'd be home free, getting ready for a house party with all the most popular kids in school.

Nothing important at all.

3. Punch Stains

Jenny Fischer's house was…large. Much larger than Christine had expected it to be. For only living a few blocks away, Jenny was clearly in a different tax bracket. The lawn was sprawling, covered hap hazardously with parked cars and plastic cups. They were only an hour and a half late, but clearly the party was in full swing.

It had taken them another hour to escape the Wheelers' house, Nancy's mother not fully satisfied they were going to study as much as they were saying. Nancy had smuggled out her outfit in her backpack—a cute pair of jeans and a shirt she'd bought earlier in the day.

Christine had no such luxury. It had taken forever to pick her closet apart, looking for something that would be even remotely suitable for the situation. The jeans were fine, her boots a given, but she wasn't satisfied with any of the sweaters or blouses she owned. Steve had seen her in worse, of course. He saw her in her normal clothes every day—and nothing would look so awful as her work uniform. Still, she wanted to look especially…something.

After an eternity of looking, she'd settled on a white tank top, one of her father's worn flannels, and an oversized denim jacket. The layers, she figured, would give her a chance to alter her look after she got to the party, once she got a look at what everyone else was wearing. Then Nancy had helped her with her makeup, which she had much more experience with.

Christine had been going for effortless grunge, cute without trying too hard. But now, standing in front of Jenny Fischer's too large house with the music playing too loud inside, the only thing she felt was disheveled and nauseous.

Nancy kicked an empty beer can on the curb, and Christine picked at the edges of her cuffs. Neither of them moved, just staring at the impossible feat that lay before them. Christine broke the silence.

"Alright, I'm gonna say it," she sighed, throwing her arms in the air. "I can't do this. I can't go in there."

"What? No!" Nancy turned to her, adamant. "You have to go in there. Steve *asked* you to go in there!"

"I know! But I can't. He should probably know that. There's no way I can do this."

"Christine, of course you can do this. You're gonna be fine."

"Right," she scoffed, shaking her head. "That's easy for you to say. You're smart, you're funny, and you're great under pressure. I am not like that. I turn into goo under pressure. I'm gonna go in there and freeze, and I'm gonna make an idiot of myself. Again."

"Hey, stop." Nancy sighed, gently taking Christine's arm and tugging her around to face her. "You are super smart, you're super funny, and as for performing under pressure…well, you're working on it. You had a whole conversation with Steve today, didn't you?"

"Yeah. Starting to think that's enough social interaction for the day."

Nancy was unamused. Changing tactics, she released Christine's arm, fixing her with a commanding glare instead.

"No, you know what? You dragged me all the way to this party. I put off studying for my test, I lied to my parents, I rode on the back of your stupid bike and then walked all the way here—all because you asked me to. So you are going to go in there and give Steve Harrington everything you've got. Make him regret every second of physics he's spent *not* talking to you. Got it?"

Christine sighed, wringing her hands together as she stared at the house.

"*Got it*, Christine?"

"Fine! Yes! I've—I've got it. Sorry."

Nancy's annoyance dropped instantly, and she offered Christine her arm. "Come on. I've got you."

Christine linked her arm through Nancy's and held onto her like a lifeline. Together they walked up the lawn, between all the cars and

cans, and pieced their way up to the door. Christine shot Nancy a side glance.

"Do…Do we knock, or do you think we just…?"

Nancy laughed, and pushed the door open.

There were more people than Christine had imagined. It looked like every single teenager in Hawkins was there, crammed into one house. Still, part of her expected the party to stop the moment she walked in, for everyone to turn and look at her like the fish out of water that she was.

But nobody did. Everyone just went around their business, running down the hallways, screaming conversations over the loud music, drunkenly dancing in the living room. An overplayed Duran Duran song was practically shaking the floor. It was overwhelming. She had no idea where to start.

Nancy, thankfully, took the lead. Squeezing Christine's hand gently, she began weaving through the partygoers, making her way into the house and tugging Christine along with her. Still, it didn't seem like they were moving in any particular direction. They looped the first floor, casing the building for someone they might know. And just when Christine was starting to worry, she heard that all too familiar voice.

"Hey, you made it!"

Steve materialized out of nowhere, swooping down on them with a smile a mile wide. He was wearing the same clothes he had been earlier, but he still seemed to fit right in with the crowd. Christine tugged nervously on her jean jacket, trying not to think about how many times she'd changed her outfit.

"Hi, Steve," Nancy said with an easy smile, immediately drawing his gaze.

"Miss Wheeler," he said, giving her a small bow. "Miss Walcott."

He bowed again, and threw her a small smirk when he looked up. Any nerve Christine had built up to say hello immediately went out

the window. Steve didn't seem to mind though.

"Let's get you ladies some drinks, huh?"

He stepped between them, breaking their connection and throwing an arm around each of their shoulders. Christine let out a small squeak as he tugged her against his side, pulling her with him as he moved through the crowd. She could only pray that he hadn't heard her.

Steve led them to the kitchen, where it was slightly less crowded. Empty bowls that had once contained snacks lined the counter, but the food was long gone. All that remained were a few packages of beer, stacks of cups, and a large bowl of alarmingly red liquid.

"So what can I get you?" asked Steve, stepping behind the counter. "We've got beer, punch, some beer, and uh…oh, look at that. Some punch."

Nancy laughed softly, and answered for both of them. "Punch is fine, thanks."

He grabbed two of the cups, scooping generous portions of the red liquid into them and holding them out. Nancy reached for hers, only for Steve to pull it back at the last second.

"Oh, uh, I should mention—you've gotta chug the first drink." He smirked, jiggling the cups in front of them. "House rules."

Christine shared a worried look with Nancy. She didn't have to look inside the cup to know that it held more alcohol than she'd ever had in a drink. She'd had a few sips of her dad's drinks, sure, maybe spilt a couple of beers. But she'd never chugged a drink in her life.

Nancy shot Steve a very unamused look, but accepted the cup. She took a deep breath, and then threw her head back, draining the cup in one shot. It took her a few seconds, and she came up coughing, but there was still a bright smile on her face.

"Alright!" Steve cheered, holding his free hand up in surrender. "Damn, Wheeler."

"Thanks," she mumbled, refilling her cup.

"Walcott," said Steve, offering the cup again. "Come on, right down the hatch. You'll be great."

Christine was fairly certain she would *not* be great, but she didn't see much of a choice after Nancy's show. She could refuse, and look like a loser, or she could try and fail, and still look like a loser. But she'd made it this far. There was no going back.

She took the cup from Steve, trying not to think about how much punch there was. Instead she focused on the science of it. It wasn't carbonated, which was one thing in her favor. All she had to do was relax her throat and make sure it went down her esophagus instead of her trachea. Easy.

Nancy sent her a supportive smile, Steve another smirk—and she threw her head back.

It was disgusting. Easily one of the most disgusting things she'd ever tasted. The punch part was too sugary sweet, the alcohol so bitter she was afraid she might vomit on the spot. It was like drinking nail polish remover. She tried to hold her breath, hoping it would help the taste. She could feel the punch dripping down her chin as she leaned back too far, but she was too desperate for it to be over to really care.

And just when she thought she'd reached the end, she choked.

Christine spluttered forcing down the punch that was still in her mouth and doubling over as it fought to come back out. She hacked uncontrollably, eyes filling with water. She could barely make out Nancy's shoes next to her, so it was probably her that was patter her back. The cup disappeared from her hand, and she clamped it over her mouth. It didn't do much to smother her coughing, and it was still a few seconds before she could get her breath back.

"Are you okay?" asked Nancy, helping her upright again.

"Yeah," Christine lied, though the sound barely croaked out. "Too fast."

"Here," Steve offered, passing her back a full cup. "That'll help. Take it easy, champ."

Christine couldn't even bring herself to look him in the eye.

They followed Steve down the hall and into the den, where Tommy and Carol were tucked away in a far corner. Carol was slung across his lap in an armchair, and there was a loveseat where Steve must've been sitting before. He ushered the two of them onto the couch, and returned a moment later with a chair he'd procured for himself.

"See?" he said, nodding to his friends in the chair. "Told ya she'd come. Pay up, asshole."

"Yeah, yeah," Tommy grumbled.

He weaseled a hand into his back pocket, making Carol squeal and jump in his lap. He fished out a wad of bills, which he passed to a grinning Steve.

Christine's heart sank further. "You made a bet?"

"Oh, not until like twenty minutes ago," said Steve, waving off her concern as he pocketed the cash. "Tommy wasn't sure you two would show. Ye of little faith."

He aimed a kick at Tommy's ankle, and Tommy angrily kicked him back. Carol had to smack him on the shoulder to get him still again.

"Actually that was my fault," said Nancy. "My parents wouldn't let me go until after dinner."

"Your parents know you're here?" asked Tommy, surprised.

"Oh, no way," Nancy laughed. "Are you kidding? They'd kill me?"

"What'd you tell them?" asked Steve.

"That I was going to Christine's. She's supposed to help me study for my chem test."

"Nice," said Carol, quirking an eyebrow. "Didn't know you had it in

you, princess."

Tommy jolted his knee under her, and Carol quickly shut her mouth. But Nancy was already shifting uncomfortably.

"What about you, Chrissy?" asked Steve. "Where do your parents think you are?"

"Oh, uh…" Christine cleared her throat, raising her voice to a volume that might actually be audible. "Actually it's just me and my dad. And he's on a business trip."

"Wooh! Party at Walcott's!" Tommy whooped. "So we're going to yours next, right?"

Christine forced herself to smile awkwardly. She wasn't sure what she was supposed to say to that. So she took a deep gulp of her punch. It wasn't so bad when she knew what to expect.

"Actually, your dad probably wouldn't mind," Nancy mused. "He's always talking about drinking responsibly and getting out more."

"Nance, do we always have to talk about my dad?"

"Why?" Carol demanded, sitting up a little straighter. "Is your dad hot?"

"Damn, Wheeler's into older dudes," Tommy laughed. He kicked Steve's leg again, and winked. "Sorry, man. Looks like you're not her type."

Christine had never seen Steve Harrington look mortified before. She wasn't entirely sure that he could look mortified. But that was the best word she could think of for the horror on his face when Tommy spoke. It was shock, it was anger, it was panic, and it was gone as quickly as it came.

Steve turned to Christine, a carefree smile on his face that was at odds with his rushed words.

"Oh, by the way, Chrissy—you were so right about the movie. It sucked. I'm so sorry you have to listen to that every weekend. I really

should've asked for my money back."

"Uh…sorry," Christine offered lamely.

"No, no, no, totally not your fault. It just—It really sucked. Uh…how was the rest of your shift?"

"Fine."

There wasn't much else to say on the subject. She'd only been at work for an hour after he'd left, something he already knew. It seemed an odd question to ask, all things considered.

"You sell any more Bottlecaps?" Tommy snickered. "Oh, *sorry*. I mean Gobstoppers."

"Dude, let it go, alright?" Steve snapped. "She made a mistake."

But Tommy was still laughing at his own joke. Just like Christine had known he was going to. And even though she'd known it was coming, she still couldn't think of anything to say. She shook her head, pretending that it was more annoying than hurtful, and took another few gulps of punch.

Nancy was watching her closely, and suddenly cleared her throat.

"Yeah, Tommy. Or maybe she was telling you to stop talking, and you just can't take a hint."

Everyone gaped at her. It was hard to tell who was more shocked—Tommy who looked like he'd just been slapped, Steve, who looked like Christmas had come a month early, or Christine, who had never heard anyone talk back to someone like Tommy H in her life.

After several seconds of silence, Carol burst into laughter. Steve was quick to join in, and even Tommy let out a surprised chuckle.

"Shit, Tommy, you better watch out," Carol giggled. "Looks like the princess has got claws."

"I will drink to that," said Steve proudly.

He leaned out of his chair, knocking his cup into Nancy's before chugging everything he had left. Tommy and Carol were whooping, Nancy laughing delicately behind her hand. Christine took another sip of her punch, and tried to ignore the sour feeling in her stomach. She was already starting to regret coming to this party.

She wished she could say it got easier after that. There was definitely less tension in the rest of group—they all talked and laughed without pause—but Christine was still having a hard time thinking of anything to stay. Her brain seemed to be moving at half the speed of the discourse. By the time she thought of something interesting to contribute, she'd realize everyone else was already two topics further along. Even if someone asked her something directly—usually Nancy or Steve—she only got a few words out before someone else would chime in.

The longer the party went on, the less she seemed to be talking. And the less she talked, the more she drank. It was nice to have something to do besides stare as the conversation slipped past her. The punch wasn't even that bad once she got used to it. In fact, it was kind of addicting.

The first time she went for a refill, Nancy insisted on coming with her.

"Are you okay?" she asked, once they were safely out of earshot.

"Yeah, fine," Christine sighed. "You know, just completely blowing my shot. As usual."

"Hey, don't let them bother you. Tommy's an idiot, and Carol's a jerk. Just be you."

"Well, 'me' tends to clam up and not have anything interesting to say." Christine rolled her eyes at herself as she scooped up more punch. She sipped it slowly, bumping her hip gently into Nancy's. "Thanks for sticking up for me, though. That was like, insanely cool."

"God, I don't even know where that came from," Nancy laughed. "Was I way harsh?"

"Um, no? Like you said, Tommy's an idiot. Anyway, Steve seemed to think it was pretty amazing."

Nancy blushed, and wrapped an arm around Christine's waist. "Come on. Let's find something you know you can talk about."

True to her word, Nancy had deliberately steered the conversation toward movies. Christine had seen just about everything that had come out in the past two years, and she was at the rental store at least twice a month. She had plenty of material to go on.

Unfortunately, that conversation didn't go exactly as planned.

"We all stayed over Christine's house last night to watch *Friday the Thirteenth*," Nancy announced. "It's her favorite."

"What's that? Horror?" asked Steve.

"Uh, yeah," Christine answered. "It came out a couple years ago. I've seen it like…nine times."

"Cool. So what's it about?"

"Well, it's…"

"Oh shit, is that the camp one?" Tommy interrupted. "Yeah! All these kids go away to some shut down summer camp, and then Jason comes back from the dead and slaughters them all. Bleeeaargh!"

He rattled Carol in his lap, miming slicing her throat while he laughed. She snorted.

"Gross. I hate all that horror shit. Blood and guts and girls that won't stop fucking screaming. *Ahh! Ahhhhhhh! Oh no, please don't kill me!"*

"Actually we were just talking about that the other day," said Nancy, giving Christine a pointed look. "Chrissy, what were you saying about horror movies having rules or something?"

Everyone turned to look at her and Christine felt her throat go dry. It was one thing to talk about her nerdy theories in the comfort of her own living room. But telling the popular kids that her favorite pass

time was watching the popular kids get murdered in horror movies? Seriously?

Nancy nudged her encouragingly, and she cleared her throat.

"Well…yeah, they are kind of stupid," she agreed, nodding at Carol. "The girls I mean. But that's usually why they end up getting killed. If—If you're stupid, or if you're mean, or if…if you sleep around or whatever, you usually get killed off. That's just the way it works."

"Dude," Tommy scoffed, grinning up at the ceiling. "I'd be so fucking dead."

"Oh for sure," Steve chuckled. "You're a triple threat, man—horny, mean, *and* stupid."

"Yeah, keep laughing, Harrington. Jason'd slice you up good, the amount of girls you've screwed."

"Not these two, though," said Carol, sneering at Nancy and Christine. "Pristine little virgins that've never broken a rule in their lives."

Nancy flipped Carol the bird, which made everyone laugh. Christine returned to her punch.

"Hey, lay off," added Steve, swatting Carol's shoulder. "That just makes them hero material, you know? Someone's gotta save our asses."

"Yeah, some of us have pretty nice asses," Tommy agreed, before groping Carol. She squealed, and smacked him again, which somehow led to the two of them making out in their armchair.

Steve rolled his eyes, ignoring them. "So, Nancy, what's your favorite movie?"

"Oh, um…probably *Risky Business*?"

"Hey, I loved that movie! That guy was so good, that uh…"

"Tom Cruise, yeah. He's great."

"Yeah, he was the whole reason Carol dragged us to see *All The Right Moves* in the first place. What was the other thing he was in this year? Um…"

"*The Outsiders*. Which was also like, so good."

"Why does that sound familiar?"

"It's a book, by S.E. Hinton. It's pretty popular. You might've read it for class."

"Shit. I was probably supposed to read it for class."

He winked at her, and Nancy giggled. Still, Christine stared at her punch.

The second time she went for a refill, Nancy did not feel the need to come with her.

The third time she went, she returned only to find that Tommy and Carol had vanished from the armchair. She didn't bother asking where they'd gone. Chances were they'd finally moved their party upstairs and were commandeering on the of the Fischers' bedrooms. Or a bathroom if they weren't picky about space.

She'd plopped into the vacant chair, placing herself between Nancy and Steve, but it didn't have any effect. Nancy's eyes never left Steve's, and Steve's never left hers. They continued to talk about a bunch of classmates Christine didn't know—what their families were up to and how they'd changed since they were kids. Christine barely recognized any of the names.

The fourth time she refilled her cup, she came back to find Nancy sitting alone on the sofa. Christine's heart soared as she plopped down next to her, smiling for the first time in what felt like hours.

"Where'd everybody go?" she asked, leaning her head on the back of the couch.

"Well, Carol and Tommy aren't back yet," Nancy answered, "and Steve just went to the bathroom."

"Bathroom," Christine repeated. Then she giggled, for absolutely no reason at all. "That sounds like a good idea."

Nancy turned to her, eyes full of concern. "Christine, are you alright?"

"Mm, ya. Why?"

"How much of that punch have you had?"

"I don't know. I'm not exactly using a measuring cup here."

Christine snorted, and took another sip of her drink. She grinned, scrunching up her face and patting Nancy on the knee to reassure her. For some reason, that didn't seem to work.

"You think maybe you should take a break?" she suggested gently. "Have some water instead?"

"Nah, I'm fine. Really. I finally found something I'm good at! You—You're good at talking to cute guys, and people, and having conversations, and I'm—I'm good at drinking. Quietly."

"Christine…"

"Nancy," she mimicked, heaving a dramatic sigh. She held up a hand, stalling Nancy's concern. "Seriously though, the—the bathroom sounds like a good idea. I'll be right back."

She stood up again, giggling as the music shifted the floor underneath her. Nancy grabbed her arm, already half out of her seat. But Christine was adamant. She forced Nancy back onto the couch, shushing her like a small child, and backed away the way she came.

"No, no, no. I'm good. I'm fine. Totally cool. Be right back. Bye. Hold on."

It took her a while to actually find a bathroom. Even then, the door was slammed in her face with screams of privacy. So she'd had to find another one. She, at least, was still sober enough to lock the door behind her.

'Drunk' was not a particularly good look on her. The bright bathroom

light wasn't doing her any favors, but the party had clearly taken a toll on her. She hadn't done anything but move back and forth between two rooms and sit on a couch, and her hair was still all over the place, her skin flushed and sweaty, her carefully applied eyeliner creating thick rings around her eyes. The punch was staining her lips too—not in a cute lipstick way, but in a lopsided blur that she couldn't seem to scrub off. Her teeth were turning pink. It almost looked like she'd coughed up blood.

Christine shed her layers, tying the flannel around her waist and shrugging the jacket back on. It was too hot, but she wasn't ready to walk around in just her tank top. She splashed some water on her face as well. It didn't help her appearance, but it did make her feel a little better.

For a moment, she considered curling up on the cold tile floor. Something told her it would feel amazing, give her a chance to appreciate the thin curtain of silence that draped the room. But she also knew she'd be extremely reluctant to get up again. Maybe it would be better to cut her losses and call it a night.

Bracing herself for the crowd once more, Christine pushed her way out of the bathroom and back toward the den. She'd just tell Nancy she wanted to go home. That wouldn't be a shocker. Nancy already seemed to notice that she was two drinks too far into drinking her problems away. They'd go home, eat leftover pizza, and they could forget tonight ever happened.

She rounded the corner to the den, and stopped dead in the tracks. Nancy was still sitting exactly where she'd left her, but Steve was finally back. Steve, who had taken Christine's seat on the couch. Steve, who had one arm around Nancy's shoulders and the other on her waist. Steve, who was kissing her fiercely, and Nancy, who was kissing him back.

Suddenly, forgetting seemed like a very slim possibility.

"Ugh, gross," said a voice, and Tommy appeared on Christine's left. "Took 'em long enough."

Carol snorted on Christine's right, and patted her on the shoulder.

"Better luck next time, Einstein. Tough break."

"Hey, plenty of fish in the sea, right?" Tommy slung an arm around her, shaking her roughly. "Yo, if you still wanna hook up with someone, I could probably find you a guy. I bet you're a real freak under that whole brainy thing."

Christine shoved him off her, pushing him so hard he collided with the wall. Her cup fell to the floor, leaving punch stains all over Carol's stockings and making the girl jump back.

"Hey! Watch it, psycho bitch!"

They were drawing too much attention. People were starting to look at her, people she didn't know. She didn't know what she was supposed to do. Laugh? Apologize? Start swinging punches?

So Christine turned tail, and she ran. All she wanted to do was put as much distance between her and that house as possible—that house, and everyone inside of it.

Later, she would wonder how she'd made it so far so fast. The world around her was dark and blurry. She could barely feel her fingers, and her teeth were gently chattering. She clamped a hand over her mouth as she turned onto her street, slowing down to a jog, a walk, a stop. All she had to do was walk up the steps to her door. But her legs didn't want to move anymore.

Christine looked around the empty street. It was dark save for the streetlamps. The houses seemed vacant, sleeping. No one would mind if she stopped for just a minute.

She sank to the asphalt, sitting on the curb and hanging her head between her knees. It was stupid. The whole thing was so stupid, stupid, stupid. She was stupid. And now she was paying for it.

Tears streaked her cheeks, and it was hard to breathe through all the snot in her nose. She ripped the flannel from around her waist and tried to wipe her face, but it didn't make her feel any better.

She felt sick. She felt tired. She felt sad. More than anything, she felt alone.

4. The Static

If this was what a hangover felt like, Christine vowed she was never going to drink again.

The end of the night was a smudge of memories—crying on the sidewalk, stumbling through the door, collapsing onto the couch. She hadn't even bothered to take off her shoes before falling asleep. Her arms felt numb where the denim jacket cut off her circulation, and she knew that the throw pillows were leaving unsightly creases in her face. But she was too tired to move.

The only idea that seemed tempting was a trip to the bathroom. At the moment, it felt like she'd sustained a gaping wound in the lining of her stomach, and gastric acid was flooding her body, disintegrating her organs as it went. She wasn't sure if vomiting would help. It certainly wasn't going to help her head, which was pounding like she'd never felt before.

Boom. Boom. Boom.

"Hey! Hellooo in there! Rise and shine, Walcott! Wake up!"

Boom. Boom. Boom.

"Hello?! I know you can hear me! Christine? Hey, Chrissy!"

Boom. Boom. Boom.

Christine groaned, pressing her face farther into the pillow. She was relieved that the pounding wasn't just her head, but she wasn't sure she had the energy to kill the person knocking on the door.

"Go away," she grumbled. "I'm up! Just go away!"

"No can do," the voice called through the wall. "Come on! Up and at 'em! Wakey, wakey, eggs and bakey! I'm not leaving!"

The banging resumed once more, twice as persistent now that she was definitely awake. Boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom, boom…

"Shut up! Fine! I'm coming!"

Christine forced her body upright, and every nerve screamed in agony. She clutched her head, waiting for the tilt-a-whirl that was her living room to come to a halt. Then she dragged herself to her feet and stomped to the front door. She threw it wide open with a death glare set on her face.

"See? I'm awake. Go home."

"Woah," said the boy on the stoop, grabbing the door before she could shut him out. "You look like shit."

"Thanks, Dustin. Go home."

"No can do. I told you. You didn't check in yesterday, so Mom sent me to make sure you're alive."

"Well, I'm alive. And it's…" She leaned back to glance at the living room clock. "Jesus! It's eight o'clock! In the morning!"

"Yeah? It's also really cold! Are you gonna let me in or what?"

Christine huffed, and threw a hand up in exasperation. Dustin mimicked her, waving his arms over his head and side-stepping her to get into the house. She smacked his hat off in retaliation, which he was only just able to recover.

"What are you doing up, anyway?" Christine asked, closing the front door. "Kind of early for a Sunday."

Dustin rounded on her with his arms over his chest. "Is it early? Or were you just up too late?"

"Excuse me?"

"That's right. What were you doing getting home so late?"

"Well, what were you doing up so late?"

"Well, what were you…?" He trailed off, realizing that she had him. Then he shrugged. "I was reading. New X-Men comic came out last

week."

"Okay. Well, I was coming home from a party."

"And I'm up because it's campaign day. I'm on my way to Mike's. You wanna come?"

Christine frowned, her memories of the previous night becoming clearer. "Uh…no. Not this time, buddy."

"Is it because you're drunk?"

"Oh ha, ha. I'm not drunk. I'm…hungover."

Dustin grinned, jabbing a finger at her. "*You* need fluids."

He marched into the kitchen without invitation. Christine went to roll her eyes, only to find that somehow hurt. She pinched the bridge of her nose and trailed behind him. Taking a seat on a stool at the counter, she watched him bustle around.

"Not to be a downer, Dust, but I don't really think *more* liquid is the solution here."

"Nope!" he said cheerily. "Alcohol dehydrates you, which is why you need to drink water. And you need to eat, to soak up all the nasty shit in your stomach."

He slammed a box of Cheerios in front of her, along with a glass of water, and slid them across the counter.

"You should also take some aspirin. But I don't know where you keep that."

"Medicine cabinet in the bathroom," she groaned, grabbing the glass. Dustin, however, didn't move. "...Well?"

"What, you want me to get it? What am I, your dad?"

"Of course." Christine shook her head with a grudging smile. "Thanks, Dustin."

"You got it."

She grabbed the box of cereal, plunging her hand unceremoniously into its depths rather than wait for a bowl. "Where'd you learn all that stuff anyway?"

"Anti-drug assembly. You probably had one too. You're just too drunk to remember."

"Not drunk," she corrected, offering him the box. "Hungover."

"Whatever." He stuffed a handful of Cheerios into his mouth, and continued. "Wha' par-ee were you ah? You didn' sah ahneethin to me 'bout it."

"Yeah, it—it was sorta a last minute thing."

"Sorra?"

"Yeah. What about it?"

Dustin gulped, fixing her with a suspicious stare. "So what does that mean, 'sorta'?"

Christine suffered through the pain to roll her eyes.

"It means someone asked me about it when I was at work."

"Was this someone a dude?"

"Dustin…"

"Was his name Steve Harrington?"

"God, you're annoying."

"Well? Was it?"

"Yes," she groaned, leaning back on her stool. "Yes, it was Steve Harrington. Are you happy?"

"Um, obviously," said Dustin, grinning. "I don't know why you're not."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Well, *Steve Harrington* asked you out," he said, raising his voice an octave at Steve's name. "Mr. Perfect *Steve Harrington* who you've been obsessed with for like, ever. I'd figured you'd be over the moon. What's your damage?"

"It's nothing," Christine sighed, propping her elbows on the counter and laying her chin in her hand. "Just girl problems."

"Girl problems like emotional drama or girl problems like body stuff?"

"Dustin!"

"What?" he asked, holding up his hands defensively. "It's a valid question!"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Did something happen?"

"What did I just say?"

Dustin jumped back, and Christine instantly regretted snapping at him. But there was some sick satisfaction that came with the silence. He didn't push her. He just frowned at the cereal box and scuffed his sneakers against the floor.

Christine turned away, busying herself with the glass of water he'd poured for her. Even after one sip, she felt a little better. Stupid psychosomatic crap.

"I heard you crying." Dustin was kicking the baseboard idly, avoiding her gaze. "When you came home last night. That's why I came to check on you."

She bit back a sigh. Annoying as he could be, Dustin always meant well. It was one of the reasons it was nearly impossible to stay mad at him.

"I'm fine, Dustin," Christine said softly. "I promise."

"Did he hurt you?"

"No."

"Do you want me to egg his house?"

"No, Dustin."

"Are you sure? Cause I really wanna egg his house."

"Yeah, I'm sure," she chuckled, shaking her head. "It's…It's not his fault anyway. Not really."

She was hoping that they could leave it at that. But of course, with Dustin there were never any open-ended conclusions. His curiosity always needed to be sated. So he stared at her expectantly until she conceded.

"It's nothing. He just doesn't like me. Not like that."

"If he doesn't like you, why did he invite you to the party?"

"Um…well, I guess he was hoping someone else would come with me."

"Who?"

This time it was Christine who stared pointedly at Dustin. A look of comprehension dawned on his face, and his mouth dropped into a small oh.

"So that's why you don't want to come to D&D."

"Yeah. And considering I ditched crying when I saw her making out with Steve, I doubt she wants to see me either."

"Gross."

Christine wiped her hands down her face, as if she might be able to remove her problems like a mask. "Look, I don't want you talking about this with the party. The last thing I need is the four of you gossiping in the basement about Nancy and me."

"Hey, I'll be cool," he said innocently. "Scout's honor."

"You're not a boy scout."

"Bard's honor."

"Slim at best."

"Well now you're just being rude. And for that, I'm taking your Pop Tarts."

"No!"

Christine lunged forward, but Dustin was faster. He swept the entire box of pastries off the counter, ran round the other side, and bolted into the living room.

It didn't take long to catch up. She grabbed him round the middle just before he got to the front door, and hoisted him up into the air. Dustin squealed, kicking his legs desperately as he tried to wriggle out of her grasp.

"Let go of me! Put me down! This is child abuse! Child abuse!"

"You're child abuse," Christine grunted. She placed him back on the ground, and wrenched the Pop Tarts out of his hands. "Gimme that. You can have *one* package. That's it."

Dustin stuck his tongue out at her, but accepted the snack without complaint. He made a show of tucking them inside his backpack, and carefully pulling it onto his shoulders. Then he dusted himself off, trying to look dignified.

"Alright, get going, loser," said Christine, walking to get the door for him.

But Dustin stayed where he was.

"You know there's always gonna be one person that loves you, right?"

"Wow," Christine laughed, ruffling his baseball hat over his curls. "You are such a ham today."

"Oh no. Not me. I meant Lucas."

"Oh my God, just get out of here, Dustin."

"No, I'm serious! He's always had a giant crush on you! Why do you think we're friends?"

Christine sighed, leaning back against the front door. "Correct me if I'm wrong, but I thought it had something to do with comic books."

"Nope. On the first day of fourth grade, you offered to walk me to school, and everyone in my class thought I was the coolest because I had a middle school girl as a friend. Lucas was the first person to say hi to me after that."

"Wait," she said, narrowing her eyes at him. "Didn't I introduce you to Mike on the first day of fourth grade?"

"Semantics." He waved a hand at her contradiction. "I just want you to remember there are people out there smarter than Steve Harrington. And we're also like, way cooler."

Christine nodded, unable to contain a warm smile. She swung the door open, letting Dustin go first and then following him out onto the stoop. He practically skipped down the path to her driveway, where his bike was waiting faithfully.

"Hey," she called, as he clambered on. "Thanks for the pep talk, Dusty."

Dustin lifted his hand in salute, and gave her a toothless grin. "Hey, I learned a new trick on my bike this week. Wanna see?"

"Yeah, go crazy."

He beamed, getting off to a rocky start as he peddled down the driveway. He looped the wrong way when he hit the street, gaining speed before he raced toward the Wheelers. Once he hit top speed, he took both hands off the bike, cupped them to his mouth, and screamed at the top of his lungs.

"STEVE HARRINGTON IS A DOUCHEBAG!"

Christine clapped a hand over her mouth. She instinctively checked the street for bystanders, but no one was around to glare reproachfully. That was a relief, since she failed to repress her snort of amusement.

"Hey!" she shouted after Dustin. "Watch your language!"

"Watch your alcohol intake!"

He waved to her over his shoulder, hardly breaking as he zoomed around the corner and completely out of sight. Christine grinned as she watched him go.

"Little shithead."

She closed the door, heading back to the living room where the couch was calling to her. She hadn't planned on being up this early. Not that she'd done much planning anyway. Her muscles begged her to go back to sleep—couch, bed, it didn't matter. However, she also knew that she had a lot of homework to do. And of course, she felt like crap.

She finished another glass of water to be safe, and passed on the Cheerios to make some toast. The thought of eating still made her insides writhe in protest, but she knew Dustin was right. She wouldn't feel any better until she got something in her stomach.

After that piss poor breakfast, she dragged herself to the bathroom. She brushed her teeth twice, desperately trying to remove the slimy feel of punch from her gums. She scrubbed at her skin in the shower, nearly scorched herself with hot water, but none of it mattered. It was like the ghost of that stupid house party had gotten under her skin.

While the shower didn't particularly help ditch her bad mood, it had made her exhausted. Christine didn't think twice as she passed the phone, or the pile or work next to her desk. That could wait until after a nice, long nap.

At least, it had seemed like a good idea at the time. It had seemed like a good idea when she woke up again at noon, the sun gently

filtering through the window. It had only started to seem questionable when she sat down at one o'clock, refreshed and well-fed, and faced the enormous pile of homework that was due the next morning.

As much as people teased her, Christine was not a particularly studious person. She wasn't diligent like Nancy—studying weeks in advance and chipping away at large projects in reasonable, organized amounts. More often than not, everything was pushed to the last minute, and she'd give it her best shot. Thankfully, her best shot was usually pretty good.

Science came easy to her. Analyzing how things worked, actually wanting to understand—it was natural for Christine. In other subjects, she had to work a bit harder. Her math grades were fine, even if she didn't love trig. What was the point of studying something they couldn't use in everyday life? She always struggled with history. Dates and names she didn't need went right to the garbage center of her brain. But at the moment, she was grappling with an English paper.

It was just a chapter analysis, and it should have been simple. But her head was aching, the words were blurry, and she couldn't have cared less about the assignment. Every few minutes, she'd get distracted by cleaning her room, or getting another snack. She told herself she was mulling the answers over in her head. She knew in reality she was just finding more ways to procrastinate.

Eventually, she reached the point where she began eyeing the telephone. Her homework wasn't the only thing she'd been putting off, and she honestly wasn't sure which chore she'd rather face. But knowing she wouldn't get much further without some assistance, she decided it was worth the risk.

Christine dragged her schoolwork into bed, pulling her phone off the nightstand and plugging in the familiar number. It only rang a few times before someone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Holland. It's Christine."

"Oh, hello, Christine! Is everything alright? It's getting a bit late, isn't it?"

"Yeah, I'm so sorry. I'm having some trouble with my English homework and I was looking for some advice. Is Barb still up?"

"You know, I think she was just heading to bed. Hold on, sweetie."

There was a moment's shuffle as Mrs. Holland pulled the receiver away, calling down the hall to her daughter. Christine barely heard her muffled reply, and a few seconds later there was a soft click as the call was passed off.

"Christine?"

"Hey, Barb. Did you finish the review for Striffler's class? I feel like I've read the chapter eight times and I'm still not finding anything useful."

"That's it?" Barb asked flatly. *"No 'what's up,' 'how are you'? 'Sorry I didn't call you back last night'?"*

Christine closed her eyes, briefly pressing the receiver against her forehead. That was the attitude she'd been hoping to avoid.

"Barb, I'm begging you. I feel like crap, I've read the same sentence seventeen times, and I just want to finish this crap so I can go to bed. Please."

"Funny," she said sourly. *"How is it you can rant for twenty minutes about symbolism and foreshadowing in Hitchcock's* Psycho*, but as soon as it's time for Striffler's assignments, it all goes out the window?"*

"Because *Grapes of Wrath* is boring as shit, Barb. Please. If I try to relate one more scene to the turtle in chapter three, Striffler's gonna have me kicked out of school."

"Fine. But you are not hanging up until we finish this conversation."

That was as good as she was going to get. It was lucky enough that Barb hadn't forced the conversation first, and made her wait for homework answers at the end. Not that she made it easy. Her advice was all given pretty flippantly, parsed with vague jabs about

unreliability and lack of commitment. Christine knew she was just joking—mostly—but she also knew she deserved it. She had promised to call, after all.

It took Barb twenty minutes to finish what Christine had been working on all evening. It was a relief to finally close her binder. She took a moment to relish the sound it made when she kicked it off her blanket and onto the floor.

"Seriously, Barb. Thank you. I'd be lost without you."

"Yeah, anytime. I'm just glad to hear you aren't…you know, dead or something."

"I'm sorry," Christine offered earnestly. "It…It was just a really rough night."

"Yeah, sounds like it."

"You already talked to Nancy."

It was a statement, not a question, but Christine was still hoping Barb might correct her. She did not.

"Yeah, first thing this morning. And again like, half an hour ago. Chrissy, you should really call her. She sounded pretty freaked."

"I'll bet," said Christine, unable to repress a snort.

"She was worried about you," Barb insisted. *"I mean, from what she said you went to the bathroom and just disappeared."*

"I was sick. If she was really so worried, she could have called me."

"She thinks you're mad at her."

Christine pursed her lips, twirling the phone cord around her finger. "Yeah, well she's not wrong."

"What happened?"

"You talked to Nancy. You know what happened."

"Maybe I wanna hear it from you."

"Right. You wanna hear it from me, or you wanna find out how much I know so Nancy can keep the rest to herself?"

"No, Christine…"

"No! Let's—Let's be real, Barb. I know why Nancy didn't call me. She wants to keep her perfect fantasy alive for just a little longer before I come into the picture and mess things up. Because, you know, it's me that messes things up. That's what I do. We went to the party, I messed up, Nancy dazzled everyone with her sparkling personality, and next thing I know, she has her tongue halfway down Steve's throat."

"Chris."

Christine huffed, banging her head against the wall.

"Sorry," she sighed. "I just…I was being an idiot. I don't know why I thought it was gonna go any differently. In the end, Nancy always gets what she wants. She always has to get what she wants."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but…she could kind of say the same thing about you."

Christine glared at the foot of her bed. "Excuse me?"

"Look, I get that you're upset," said Barb, speaking very quickly now, *"and I totally feel that. It sucks. But look at it from her point of view. You made it into Steve's class, you got to be his lab partner, he visits you at work, and every time Nancy's tried to be supportive. She's been happy for you. That's all she wants from you."*

"It's not like I chose to be Steve's partner. I didn't have any control over that. She didn't have to kiss him."

"Takes two to tango," she pointed out. *"And I'm willing to bet that you're not as angry at Steve as you are at her."*

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"Oh come on, Christine. I know you're smarter than that."

"How can I blame him for liking Nancy better?" she sighed, picking at the edge of her blanket. "Everybody else does."

"Okay, no. You are not allowed to turn this into a pity party."

"I'm just saying it's true. It's not his fault."

"It is his fault because he's using you! He used you to get to Nancy, just like he's using you to pass physics! Chris, you…you have to know that."

Christine frowned down at her sheets. She did know it. She'd known it from the moment Tommy had made that stupid joke and Steve had freaked out. She'd probably even known it before. But what on earth was she supposed to do about that? She couldn't get away from him. She couldn't just stop saying yes, even if she wanted to. It was so much easier to pretend it wasn't happening. At least then she got to enjoy some of his company.

"It doesn't seem to bother Nancy," she said instead.

Barb scoffed on the other end of the line. *"I know. And I won't pretend she's not being dumb. It's just because you're both blinded by his luscious locks or his sunglasses or whatever it is."*

Christine chuckled wistfully. "Yeah. Sorry about that."

"Hey," she continued, her voice softer this time. *"I know that he's cute, and he's super popular and charming, but…you deserve more than that. I need you to know that."*

"Thanks, Barb."

"Anytime. Really. Anytime you need me to remind you that the guy's dumb as dirt, I will." Christine snorted, and she could hear Barb's smile through the phone. *"I just worry about you, Chris."*

"Did you say all this to Nancy?"

"I tried to. She was actually pretty blasé about the whole thing. Keeps insisting 'there's nothing to worry about' and 'it wasn't like that.'"

"Right. Take it from someone who was there. It was definitely like that."

She bit the inside of her cheek, trying to focus on the intricate seam-work of her comforter. She didn't want to remember what they'd looked like cuddled together on the couch, wrapped up in each other's arms. The image kept creeping up behind her eyelids when she blinked. She suspected that was part of the reason she still felt so nauseous.

"Is that why you left?" Barb asked gently.

"Kinda," admitted Christine. "Part of it, anyway. I was pretty drunk, and then Tommy and Carol started ragging on me about the whole thing."

"Assholes."

"Yeah, well, I shoved Tommy into a wall so…I kinda split after that."

"Look at you," Barb laughed. *"What a badass."*

"Oh, totally. I spilled punch on Carol and then ran out of the house crying. Real badass."

Christine managed a grin, but it was short lived. Another thought was creeping up on her, a question she wasn't certain she wanted the answer to.

"Was Nance mad that I left?"

"No, no," Barb assured her. *"Mostly she just sounded concerned, but… Steve also drove her home, so. I imagine that had something to do with it."*

"Right." Her heart sank, which didn't help matters with her stomach. "Of course."

"I really think you should call her, Chrissy. You two need to talk."

"I know. I know, I do. I just…I kind of want to wait until I know what I want to say. Until I'm over it."

"Do you really think you're gonna get over it?"

"Well…no. But I'd at least like to wait until I can close my eyes without imagining the two of them groping each other again."

"It could be worse. You could be stuck seeing Tommy and C—…"

The line went dead without warning. Or not dead, so much as broken. Loud static screeched from the phone, and Christine wrenched it away with a yelp. She rubbed her ear, grimacing.

"Hello? Barb? Barbara?"

She rattled the handset at a loss, then whacked the base for good measure. When that didn't work, she jiggled the hook. She brought the phone back to her ear, expecting to hear the dial tone, but—nothing. Just the static that she couldn't place.

Christine frowned, dropping the set back on her nightstand. Well. At least she had a good excuse for avoiding Nancy.

Figuring she would worry about it later, Christine decided to get ready for bed. She shoveled all of her books into her bag, and double checked that the front and back doors were locked. The bathroom light flickered annoyingly—too dim, too yellow, then bright enough to blind her as she brushed her teeth. She smacked it to limited effect, and made a mental note to change the bulb sometime soon.

She slipped under the covers, stretching slightly so she could turn off her lamp. And just before she could, the light flickered, and went out.

Christine paused. A glance out the window confirmed that there couldn't be a blackout. The streetlamps were still shining brightly, and a few of the lights were still on next door. She listened carefully, but there was nothing out of the ordinary. Just the clicking of her alarm clock, the gentle rumble of the heater. A dog barked somewhere down the block, but besides that, it was silent.

Nothing stood out, except for the uneasy prickle on the back of her neck. She did her best to ignore it, and pulled the blankets a bit tighter around her.

5. Careless Talk

"You look better today."

Dustin was waiting in the driveway when Christine came out the next morning. She stuck her tongue out at him as she collected her own bike, which made him grin.

"Mom made you lunch," he added, offering her a brown paper bag. "Just in case your power went out last night."

"Power? You guys too?"

"Yup. Killed everything in the fridge. Which sucks but means we get to have fluffernutters."

"Sick." Christine took the bag, stowing it away in her backpack. "My fridge is still going, but I don't say no to a fluffernutter."

"Man, brown outs are so lame," Dustin complained. "Blackouts are fun. That shit's exciting. Not being able to do *some* things is just dumb."

"Language, Dustin."

They set off together down the street. Dustin always pedaled faster than Christine, and had to loop around at every stop sign waiting for her to catch up. He'd tease her about being a slowpoke from time to time, but it was something they were both used to. They didn't bike to school together every day, but the ride was nicer with company.

"Did you talk to Nancy?" asked Dustin, pulling up beside Christine.

"Nope. Did *you* talk to Nancy?"

"Nope. I told you I wasn't gonna say anything. You might think bards are all show and charisma, but my word means something. Besides, she was being a real jerk yesterday. I offered her the last slice of pizza and she just slammed the door in my face."

"Don't take it too hard," said Christine. "It's me she's mad at, not you."

"Why is she mad at you? She's the one who kissed the guy. You should be mad at her."

"*No*, I shouldn't. She's my friend, and I love her, so I should be happy for her."

"But you liked him first, didn't you?"

"That's not how it works, Dust," she sighed. "You can't call dibs on people. They make their own choices."

"Yeah, but I thought your friends are always supposed to come first."

It took her a minute to come up with a response to that one. Christine pushed down the remnants of her rage, and steeled her resolve.

"They are. Which is why I'm not mad at her."

"You're not?" Dustin asked, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Nope."

"Not even a little bit?"

"Absolutely."

"Are you sure?"

"One hundred percent."

"So if you biked up to the high school right now, and Nancy and Steve were sucking face in the parking lot…"

"Oh my God, shut up, Dustin."

She flipped him off, and Dustin raised a warning finger. "Hey, watch your language! Your—Your hand…language. Shit."

Christine smirked at his fumble, and took the opportunity to change the subject.

"Hey, Mike said the new ham shack should be in soon. He wouldn't

say if I was allowed to see it. You gonna put in a good word for me?"

"Oh shit! That's like today! Yes! Oh, hell yes!"

Dustin spent the rest of the ride gushing about the new radio, all the features it was supposed to have, how much it cost. Christine listened intently, trying to focus on his rambling instead of the trouble waiting for her on the horizon.

They split ways on the main road—Dustin going to meet up with his friends while Christine turned toward the high school. It was annoying having to weave through all the speeding cars of the upperclassmen, and she got honked at more than once for cutting someone off. Almost no one rode their bikes to school anymore. On the bright side, that meant she never had to fight someone for a spot. There was always space at the bike rack.

Christine kept her head down as she walked to her locker. No one looked her way, and there were no waves of whispers floating around her. She allowed herself to relax just slightly. Part of her had worried that after the scene she'd caused with Tommy, the halls would be echoing with the words "psycho bitch." But to everyone else, it just seemed like another teenage party. People drank, people hooked up, people cried—and the world kept spinning on.

She dropped her bag in her locker, and out of habit headed down the hall toward Nancy's. She stopped short when she realized what she was doing. She hadn't thought at all about what she wanted to say. What if Nancy flipped on her for bailing on the party? What if she really was with Steve, sucking face in the hallway like Dustin had said?

Christine gripped her books tighter, and forced herself forward. She couldn't avoid Nancy forever. It was better to get it over with and just move on with her day.

Nancy was already at her locker, but thankfully, Steve was nowhere in sight. Instead she was talking to Barb, who was smirking at something Nancy had said. Nancy laughed, but stopped abruptly when she spotted Christine. She had to rush to cover her shock with a smile.

"Morning," Christine said, casually as she could muster. "What are we laughing at?"

"Oh, nothing!" Nancy's words were rushed, and Christine didn't miss the side glance she shot to Barb. "Uh, hey! How are you feeling?"

"Better. I was…pretty wrecked yesterday. Hungover, I mean. That punch was stupid strong."

"Right. No, yeah, I figured that was what happened."

"I'm sorry I bailed. I was just like…puking and nauseous and…"

"No, it's totally fine! I—I caught a ride home so…it's cool."

They nodded at each other in silence. Nancy averted her eyes to the books in her arms, and Christine inspected a ripped sticker on a locker two doors down. But Barb caught her eye, giving her a painfully pointed look, and Christine struggled to bite down her sigh.

"So. You and Steve. Congrats."

Nancy's head shot up like a bottle rocket, her eyes wide. "No, no! It wasn't like that. I don't know how much you heard or—or what you saw, but it wasn't like that. Really."

"Nancy, it's fine."

"I mean, he kissed me, yes. And it was great. But it's like you said, right? It's not exactly a marriage proposal."

"Nancy," Christine said firmly. "It's fine. I'm really happy for you."

She wasn't sure if the words sounded convincing. They certainly didn't seem so to her. But Nancy's shoulders sagged in relief, and Barb nodded approvingly.

"I was just telling Nancy that she better not be too cool to hang out with us anymore. If she becomes friends with Tommy H or Carol, I swear…"

"Oh, that's gross," Nancy scoffed, turning back to her locker. "Okay,

I'm telling you it was a one-time…two-time thing."

Barb raised her eyebrows, and Christine laughed politely. It wasn't as hard as she'd expected. Nancy might be lying through her teeth about the whole ordeal, but as long as she did, the venomous shred of hope in Christine's chest still had a tiny spark. There was plausible deniability. Until, of course, Nancy opened her locker.

A small rip of paper fell onto Nancy's books, which she unfolded without a second thought. The big blue words would have been impossible to hide even if she'd tried to.

Meet me. Bathroom. –Steve

Christine's tiny spark spluttered out.

"You were saying?" Barb asked slyly, and Nancy flushed scarlet.

"I—I should probably go. I might have left something in his car, or maybe he wants to…"

"To ravage you before class," Barb finished, waving a hand. "Go, Nance. We'll see you in homeroom."

Nancy gave a nervous look to Christine, who luckily still had the polite smile stuck on her face.

"Yeah, go. We'll catch you later."

Nancy nodded, quickly collecting her books from her locker. Then she darted down the hallway toward the nearest bathroom, her excitement already beginning to burst through her face.

"Well, that was painful," said Barb, once she'd disappeared. "But nice job."

"Hey, I'm trying, okay?" Christine huffed as they headed in the opposite direction. "I know I should be supportive. I'm just still…"

"Heartbroken?"

"Bummed," she corrected flatly.

"Well, it definitely could have been worse," said Barb. She bumped Christine with her shoulder, gently knocking the shorter girl off track. "I just wish you two had done it over the phone so I didn't have to witness it."

"I tried calling her, seriously. But after I called you, the connection just went completely out of whack. All I could get was static."

"Yeah, me too. My parents had the news on this morning? Apparently it was county-wide. Some people still don't have power."

"Seriously?" Christine furrowed her brow, thinking back to her bedside lamp, Dustin's fridge. "Power lines down or something?"

"Well that's the thing," said Barb. "They've got no idea what caused it. Scientific anomaly."

"Great. That's real comforting."

"For sure. Especially when my dad starting going on about the Russians."

They were two of the first to arrive for homeroom, and took seats in the back so they could gossip in low voices. Barb forced Christine to recount everything that had happened on Saturday, from Steve's clever convincing at the movie theater to the disastrous party itself. It didn't seem so bad now that she was twenty-four hours removed. It actually felt nice to get it all out. And as much as Barb had teased and egged on Nancy in the morning, she still offered a sympathetic ear to Christine's complaining.

For this, Christine was eternally grateful. She didn't want to stick Barb in the middle of some stupid, petty fight. It wouldn't be fair to her, not after all the times she'd put up with their daydreaming and giggling. At the same time, she knew it wouldn't be easy. Especially when the final bell rang fifteen minutes later, and Nancy still had not joined them in class.

"Alright, everyone settle down," their instructor, Ms. Snider, called. "Faster we get through this, the faster you can get back to your lives. Gina Atwood?"

"Here!"

"Ana Bently?"

"Here."

"Jonathan Byers? Jonathan? No? Alright. Warren Chadwick?"

"Here!"

They combed farther and farther down the list, and Christine's eyes stayed glued to the door. She was one minute late, two minutes, three…

"Christine Walcott? Christine?"

Barb had to kick her under the desk, and Christine jolted upright. "Uh, here! Sorry."

"Thank you, Miss Walcott. And Nancy Wheeler? Nancy?"

Christine looked at the door, but it remained firmly closed.

"Alright, then," said Ms. Snider, clapping the front of the podium. "Announcements. Hawkins Elementary is still looking for volunteers to help in their annual field day. If you're interested in that, make sure you stop by the front office to look at the sign-up sheet. If you're not interested in that, may I remind you that it does count as extra credit toward physical education. So those few of you who are so keen on skipping gym might want to think twice. The honor society is also hosting…"

A loud creak interrupted as the classroom door inched open. Nancy squeezed inside, then froze when she noticed that every single person in the room was looking at her. A few students giggled, but Snider didn't bother quieting them.

"Miss Wheeler. Thank you for joining us. If you'll find a seat, so we can continue."

Nancy's flustered blush was visible from the other side of the classroom. Her tousled hair was a bit subtler, as were her swollen

lips. But to Christine they stuck out like stains on a white carpet. She gripped her pencil a bit tighter, grinding the graphite into a fine powder against her desk.

After homeroom, Christine decided to change her strategy. She couldn't avoid Nancy forever, but she could damn well avoid her for now. She hurried out of every class they had together, and used her queasy stomach as an excuse to duck into bathrooms wherever possible. She knew Nancy was suspicious, but there was little that could be done about that. Avoiding her was better than completely losing it in the middle of the hallway, wasn't it? In the end, it would all be for the best.

Christine could avoid Nancy to the best of her ability. But there were some things she just couldn't run from.

Steve slid into his seat just as the bell rang, his physics textbook in hand. Christine watched him out of the corner of her eye, but did not raise her head. The plan was to deny him the satisfaction of her attention. He had Nancy for that now, and Christine was putting her foot down.

"Okay, people," called Mr. Austin, propping his feet up on his desk. "First thing's first, place your lab reports in the hand-in bin, and then back to your seats to read the intro to chapter eight. Lecture starts in ten."

"Reports?" Steve echoed. "We have…? Shit. Christine, did you…?"

She wordlessly slid the paper over him, focusing intently on her textbook.

"Oh, thank Christ. You're a freaking angel."

She only listened as he scribbled his name next to hers on the paper, and hurried up to the front of the class to hand it in. She would not look up from her work. She would not, she would not, she would not…

Steve collapsed back into his chair, peeking over at her book to check the page number. It even seemed like he was able to read a couple

sentences before he got distracted. He ran a hand through his hair, and traced a few lines of the first paragraph. She watched his hand drift to the edge of the book, where his thumb stroked down the corner a few times. Then he reached over and tapped Christine's page.

"Hey," he said softly, ducking his head to avoid the teacher's gaze. "How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"Oh, good. Tommy said you ran out of the party on Saturday. I thought you might've been sick."

"Nope."

Steve's hand flinched in the corner of her vision, but Christine ignored it. She wasn't even reading the chapter at this point, just glaring down at the fine print. She was not going to look at him. She wasn't going to do it.

"Hey, did your power go out last night?" he tried. "My dad was yelling about the TV for like an hour. It was nuts."

"Yeah, wild."

She winced. She knew she was being short. But he deserved it, right? After everything he'd done, she shouldn't care if his feelings were hurt. She should probably celebrate. Serve him right for…

Steve reached over before she was prepared, brushing the back of her hand. It was just one finger, barely ghosting over her skin, but her body reacted like it was a thousand-volt shock. She looked up instantly, meeting his gaze.

"Chrissy, you sure you're okay?"

He looked concerned, truly and honestly. And God, did she want to believe that he was. But he'd given her looks like that before. It hadn't meant a damn thing.

"I'm fine, Steve." Her voice was feebler than she'd intended, which

was infuriating. She snatched her hand away from him. "Seriously. Now look at your book and read the chapter before Austin gives you detention again and I have to write your notes on this too."

Steve gaped at her, eyebrows shooting up in surprise. "Wow. Bossy."

Christine rolled her eyes and went back to her book, prompting Steve to let out a low whistle. That, unfortunately, caught the attention of Mr. Austin.

"Harrington, do I need to come back there and hold your hand through the reading?"

"No, sir," Steve replied, giving him a thumbs up. "Just read something super interesting. Sorry, sir."

Laughter rippled across the classroom, but Austin let him off the hook.

Steve left her alone after that, for the most part anyway. Occasionally, Christine could feel his eyes lingering on her. On any other day, it would have been thrilling. Today all she wanted to do was burrow into the floor and disappear forever.

As soon as the bell rang, she was out of her seat. She swiped her books into her arms all at once, grabbed her backpack, and rushed out of the door as fast as she could. It was easier to breathe in the hallway, away from the lingering smell of expensive cologne and hairspray, but only until she heard the footsteps rushing up behind her.

"Hey, Christine, wait up!"

She did not want to wait up. If it wouldn't have caused a scene, she would have sprinted down the hallway like a track star. But she didn't need that kind of attention. So she slowed down her pace to a normal walk and waited for Steve to catch up to her.

"Damn, you're in a hurry," he laughed. It faltered a bit when she didn't join in, but it didn't stop him from continuing. "You heading to lunch?"

"Yes."

"Alright, cool. I just wanted to know if you guys wanted to join us."

"…What?"

"You know, me, Tommy, Carol, a couple other people. I figured you could eat with us. You, Nancy, and uh…that other chick you're always hanging around with."

"I can't," Christine said instantly.

Steve stared at her. "You…can't?"

"Yeah, um…my fridge died last night cause of the blackout. Brown out. Whatever."

"O-kay? So what, you're buying?"

"No, uh…my neighbor packed lunch for me. She's super sweet, and wanted to make sure I had something, but I have to go pick it up from her son at the middle school, so…yeah. I gotta go. Thanks, though."

He was still squinting at her, and she had run out of things to say. Without any real choice, Christine turned on her heel and fled down the hallway, cursing under her breath as she walked right out the door and into the parking lot. She didn't dare stop. She walked all the way around the building and back into the school through a different entrance. Then she headed for her locker, where the lunch from Mrs. Henderson was safely tucked away.

She twisted the paper bag in her hands, deliberating. Then she slammed her locker shut and walked in the opposite direction of the cafeteria.

She didn't really have a plan laid out. The only objective was staying as far away from her problems as she physically could.

She wound up by the gymnasium. Satisfied that no one would come looking for her here, she sank to the ground, leaning her back against the giant tiger mural splayed across the wall. She fished her Walkman

out of her backpack and slipped on her headphones. The smooth vocals of "Careless Talk" by Billy Joel filled her ears, and she cranked up the volume. On the highest setting, she could almost drown out the sounds of the basketball game going on inside.

Christine opened her lunch bag, smiling morosely at the squished fluffernutter. She'd have to thank Claudia for thinking of her. There was no telling what kind of emotional trauma she'd prevented by giving Christine an out.

The rest of the day stretched on, a war on Christine's nerves. She'd had to bullshit her way through a conversation with a very concerned Nancy after lunch, explaining that Steve must've misunderstood what she'd told him. *Her* fridge hadn't died. *Dustin's* had, and she had to bring him his lunch because he left early for school. It was a much better lie than her previous one, but Nancy still didn't believe her. That wasn't a surprise, but things were still too awkward to push the issue.

In fact, almost all the conversations she had with Nancy were turning out to be painful. They were either over complimentary to each other, or so short they were barely talking at all. It hurt, and Barb was clearly growing exasperated with both of them. At the same time, Christine found it comforting that Nancy didn't know how to handle the situation either.

It was a relief when the final bell rang at the end of the day. Christine collected her things and escaped out a side door, taking the long way to the bike rack so she could avoid any unwanted interactions. She even went the extra mile to bike to the middle school instead of heading home, just so she wouldn't pass Barb and Nancy on the road.

Hawkins High School let out about twenty minutes before Hawkins Middle, so she had to wait a while before the students rushed out. She finally spotted Dustin's hat among the masses, where he was walking with Mike and his friend Lucas. She waved, but the boys were deeply involved in their own conversations. They didn't notice her until they were right on the curb, and she cleared her throat behind them.

"Hello? Earth to the Dungeon Squad."

All three boys jumped, wheeling around clumsily with their bikes.

"Christine!" Dustin complained, laying a hand on his chest. "Don't do that! And don't call us that!"

"Sorry. Dungeon People?"

"Oh, ha, ha. You're hilarious."

"Uh…hi, Christine," said Lucas, smiling brightly.

Dustin and Mike both rolled their eyes, and Christine contained her chuckle.

"Hey, Lucas. How ya doing?"

"Great. I mean—I'm cool."

"We're *not* cool," said Mike, glaring pointedly at Lucas. "And we were kind of in the middle of something."

"Yeah, you know," Dustin added. "Places to go, people to see. Later Chrissy!"

"Woah, woah, woah," said Christine, watching as they climbed onto their bikes. "Where are you rushing off to? And aren't you missing one? Where's Byers?"

The boys froze, and all exchanged downcast looks. Christine stood up a little straighter, inspecting them closely.

"Guys? What's going on?"

It was Mike that answered her first.

"He's gone."

"Gone? Like, he skipped?"

"No, he didn't skip," he snapped. "I said he's *gone*."

"Chief Hopper came down to talk to us," Dustin supplied. "Will's mom can't find him anywhere. He's just…gone."

"Gone?" she echoed, again. "What do you…? When was the last time you saw him?"

"Last night," said Lucas, "after the campaign. We left Mike's at eight."

"I biked home with him," Dustin continued. "We raced to my house and then he kept going. No one knows what happened."

Christine bit her lip. She didn't know Will very well, but he was a quiet kid. Not the type to skip town for kicks, especially without his best friends. And if the cops had come down to question them, it sounded serious. Her mind flashed back to homeroom, and the empty desk where Jonathan Byers usually sat.

She did her best not to let the worry show on her face.

"I'm sure he's fine," she said supportively. "And if he's not, the police will find him. Hawkins isn't that big."

"If he's still in Hawkins," said Mike.

"Well…one thing at a time. Come on. I wanna make sure you all get home okay."

"NO!"

All three boys began clamoring at once, supplying various excuses and trying to inch away before she noticed. But Christine simply held up her hands, unfazed.

"Listen, if Will's really in trouble, I'm not letting you guys go off alone. You can talk on the walkies when you get home, but I don't think you should be wandering."

"We'll be fine," Mike insisted. "It's like you said. Will's probably uh—completely okay. Nothing to worry about."

"And we won't wander off," added Dustin. "Cross our hearts."

Christine stared down the boys. Mike and Dustin maintained their poker faces, smiling innocently until she looked away. She zeroed in on Lucas, who was repeatedly adjusting his grip on his handlebars.

After a few seconds under scrutiny, he cracked.

"I don't know, guys," he sighed. "Maybe Christine is right. You heard what the chief said."

Mike smacked him, and Christine raised her eyebrows.

"Oh? What exactly did the chief say, Lucas?"

Both Mike and Dustin were glaring at him now. Lucas squeezed his eyes shut, bracing for the inevitable impact.

"He made us promise not to go looking for Will."

"What the hell, Lucas?!"

"Asshole. You are so whipped."

"HEY!"

The arguing stopped abruptly, and the boys turned to stare at Christine. She stepped forward, and jabbed a finger at each of them in turn.

"Listen up. I have had a really shitty day, so the last thing I need is to listen to the three of you arguing all the way home. I'm biking each of you to your houses, and if I find out you didn't stay there, I tell your parents. End of discussion. Got it?"

They nodded reluctantly, though Dustin was still giving her a pissy look as she hopped back onto her bike.

"You're crabby. If you had such a bad day, why didn't you just go home?"

"I made the mistake of thinking hanging out with you might make me feel better. My bad."

"Lay off, Dustin," said Lucas, and he stepped up to her side. "Sorry you had a bad day, Chrissy."

"Thanks, Lucas."

"You're way too good for Steve Harrington anyway."

Christine turned deadly slow toward Dustin, who already had his hands up in the air.

"Lucas made me tell him!"

"What? I did not!"

"Yes, he did! I told you! He's crazy about you!"

"You're dead, Henderson!"

Dustin was off like a gunshot, Lucas right on his tail as they raced for the main road. Christine screamed for them to slow down, but it was no use. She huffed, sitting back on her bike, and Mike snorted next to her.

"You still want to bike home with us?"

"Nice try, Wheeler. Get pedaling."

They stopped at the Wheeler's first—"stopped" being a rather loose term, as Christine barely stayed long enough to see Mike make it to the door. Then they dropped off Lucas, before circling back around to their own street to head home. Dustin whined obnoxiously as Christine parked her bike in his driveway, insisting on walking him all the way into the house in case he tried to make a run for it. Judging by all his complaining, it was exactly what he'd been planning to do.

"Dusty? Is that you?" Mrs. Henderson came shuffling into the living room, one arm around her overweight cat and the other on her hip. "You're late! I was getting worried!"

"Blame Chrissy," he scoffed, walking straight down the hallway to his room. "She wouldn't let us bike home alone."

"Well, that is because Christine is the best babysitter in Hawkins."

"She's not my babysitter, Mom! She's my friend, and she's annoying!"

The door to Dustin's room slammed shut, and Mrs. Henderson huffed. "I don't know what's gotten into him! He's been so rude lately."

"It's fine, Mrs. Henderson," Christine said with a shrug. "He's just worried about Will. All of them are."

"God, that poor thing." She pressed a hand to her cheek, shaking her head. "You know, Joyce Byers called me this morning at wit's frayed end. I can't imagine what's she's been through. If it had been Dusty, I don't know what I'd do."

"Well, you don't have to worry about that. So long as he doesn't climb out a window to go look for Will, I think he'll be okay."

"What are we going to do with him?" she asked, shaking her head. Christine almost answered, but Mrs. Henderson lifted her cat's face up to her nose instead. "Huh, Mews? What are we going to do with him?"

Christine laughed awkwardly, taking a step back toward the door. "Alright, well I'm gonna head home…"

"Are you sure, sweetheart? Do you want to stay for dinner? I'm making lasagna!"

"No, no. No worries. I don't want to be a bother."

"Oh hush! You're never a bother, Christine. I can't thank you enough for taking care of Dusty. You could even stay here for the night, if you'd like. I don't like the idea of you alone over there, especially with everything going on."

"I'll be fine, really. I'm not planning on heading out anywhere. Besides, if anyone tries to get in the house, I've always got my dad's shotgun."

Mrs. Henderson did not seem to find that as funny as Christine did. She pursed her lips, and hugged her cat a little bit closer.

"Alright. If you're sure. But I want you to call me before you go to bed tonight. I don't want to have to worry about you vanishing too."

"You got it, Mrs. Henderson."

"Christine, you're nearly sixteen years old. 'Claudia' is fine."

"Right. Sorry." Christine waved goodbye, but hesitated for a moment at the front door. "Claudia? Thanks for the fluffernutter. It…kinda saved my day."

Mrs. Henderson smiled. "Anytime, sweetie. I figured you could use it. Dusty mentioned you had a rough weekend."

"Ugh. Did he tell *everyone*?"

"Probably," she laughed lightly. "But it's only because he worries about you."

"Yeah, well. I guess I worry about him too." Christine bit her lip, tapping on the edge of the doorframe. "If you want, I'll take him all the way to school tomorrow. Just to be safe."

"Ah! You're the sweetest." Mrs. Henderson placed her cat on the floor, hurrying over to Christine to give her a kiss on the cheek. "You're like my own little angel."

"Yeah," Christine muttered to herself as she stepped out onto the porch. "So I've been told."

6. Pitching In

"And in Roane County, the search for Will Byers has developed into a full-fledged investigation. The twelve-year-old boy was reported missing by his family yesterday morning, and the Hawkins Police Force has been organizing search parties throughout the night. Police have yet to release an official statement of their findings, though one bystander told reporters they saw two officers exiting the woods with a child's bike sometime late afternoon. For more on this story, we…"

Christine turned off the television with more force than was necessary. It hadn't truly processed until she'd woken up the next morning. A kid gone missing in a small town like Hawkins. A kid that she knew—knew well enough anyway. She'd watched Will play Dungeons and Dragons with his friends, raced him home with Dustin, snuck him extra candy when he went to the movies with his mom. The news ran stories about missing kids all the time, and sure it was sad, but it had never really affected her. Now just seeing Will's picture, smiling without care or worry, made her stomach feel a bit queasy.

She collected her school things earlier than usual, going to knock on the Henderson's door.

"Come in!" Mrs. Henderson was already bustling around the front room, her coat on and her car keys in hand. "Oh, there you are, Christine. Thank you so much for doing this."

"No problem, Claudia. Where's Dustin?"

"He should be out in a minute. Dusty! Christine is waiting for you! Let's go!"

"I KNOW! I'm MOVING!"

"Heading into work early?" Christine asked, watching Mrs. Henderson slip on her shoes.

"Yes. I'm hoping to sneak out a few minutes early and head down to the station to help with the search party. Now, Dustin's going to the

Wheelers' after school—they were all so insistent on those radios—so you don't have to worry about bringing him home. I do want you to be careful though. Maybe you could go with them and spend some time with Nancy?"

"Uh, yeah, I'll figure something out," Christine said airily. "I might go down to the station myself. It feels kind of weird sitting at home with everything that's going on."

"Oh, alright. Just be careful. Please!"

Dustin came bursting out of the hallway, tripping over himself as he rushed for the door.

"Come on, people! Let's move it! I don't wanna be late! Love you, Mom! See you later! Chop chop, Christine!"

Christine shared a dubious look with Mrs. Henderson, but followed Dustin out into the driveway. "What's got you in such a tizzy?"

"My education, Christine. Sorry for thinking school is important."

The statement was punctuated with a sneeze so powerful that Dustin nearly knocked himself over. Christine raised an eyebrow.

"Bless you."

"Thanks."

They started off toward the middle school, moving faster than they normally would have. Dustin wasn't looping around at the corners to wait for her anymore, and more than once he completely blew through a stop sign. She didn't comment at first, but after he hydroplaned through a giant puddle and nearly lost control, she had to put the proverbial brakes on.

"Alright, what the hell is going on with you?" she demanded, pulling up on his right. "You have got to slow down, Dust."

"No can do. Gotta get to school."

"What is so important that you can't stop at a stop sign?"

"Learning!" he insisted. Dustin sneezed again, his bike veering dangerously as he fought to recover. "And I've gotta talk to Mike and Lucas. Party meeting. Confidential."

"Uh-huh." She narrowed her eyes at him, unimpressed. "You went out last night, didn't you?"

"What? No! That's crazy! Why would you say something like that?"

"Because you lie like your pants are in a permanent state of combustion."

Dustin turned to her with a wide grin. "That was a good one."

"Thank you. Did you sneak out last night?"

"Yeah," he said reluctantly, wiping his nose on his sleeve. "And it was raining. And now I'm sick."

"Not to be an asshole, but you kind of earned it."

"Are you gonna tell my mom?"

"Depends," said Christine with a steady glare. "Are you going out again tonight?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Then I don't know. *Maybe* I will."

For a few blocks, they biked in silence. Dustin kept his eyes forward, pouting at the ground. Christine wanted to stand her ground, leave her disciplinary action to stand on its own. But it was always uncomfortable when Dustin went quiet. She didn't like seeing him upset.

"Did you find anything?" she prodded. "When you went investigating?"

"Nothing that will help us find Will," he said, defeated.

"Anything interesting?"

"Do you think there are really crazy people at Pennhurst?"

"I—What?" Christine blinked. "Pennhurst?"

"Yeah, the asylum in Kerley County. Lucas says there's a lot of psychos there. Like, Michael Myers psychos."

She stared at him, trying to gauge whether or not he was serious. "You think Michael Myers took Will?"

"Don't be stupid, Christine," he complained. "If Michael Myers got to Will, we would have found his body by now. This is a completely separate conversation."

"Okay, uh… Do I think there are crazy people in the mental facility in Kerley County? Yeah, I think there are probably a few."

"Nuts," said Dustin, shaking his head.

Nothing more was said of the subject.

Christine dropped Dustin off at the front doors to the middle school, staying to watch him park his bike and double check his backpack for his books. She grabbed him by the arm before he headed inside, forcing him to face her.

"Listen. I know you want to find Will. But you can't just go running around after dark when nobody knows where you are. That's exactly how Will got lost in the first place."

"I know," he said sheepishly. "But the party can't abandon him. What if he needs us?"

"Then you should probably be taking care of yourself, shouldn't you?" She ruffled his curls, and sighed. "I know you're probably not gonna listen to me. But seriously, Dust. If you guys decide to go out looking for Will, *tell me*, okay? I don't want you out there alone."

Dustin finally looked up at her, a small smile showing the gap at his gums. "You'll come with us?"

"We'll see. But you have to be honest with me."

"Okay. Promise."

"Good. Now get going."

She shoved his shoulder lightly, pushing him toward the building. He waved as he hopped up the steps, but Christine waited until he was safely inside before turning around and heading for the high school.

In retrospect, she probably should have left earlier. The high school parking lot was almost empty when she got there—full of cars, but devoid of people. The warning bell rang inside, and Christine cursed under her breath. She was late.

She stashed her bike, fumbling with her backpack as she sifted through the contents. She wouldn't have time to stop at her locker, but she had most of her morning assignments with her. Some of the textbooks she might be able to share, and she could always write notes in a different notebook and just transfer—

"Ouch!"

A collision knocked Christine off her feet, and she just barely avoided toppling to the pavement. A hand grabbed her arm to steady her, then released her almost immediately.

"Sorry! Sorry, I didn't mean—…"

"Jonathan, hey." Christine gripped the bike rack, rolling her ankle around until she was sure she could put weight on it. "Sorry, that was my fault. I'm late so…shit."

Christine looked at the ground, where thirty or forty flyers were scattered around. Will's face stared up at her, the same picture they were using on the news.

"Shit, I'm sorry." She bent down to help him, grabbing frantically at everything in her reach before the wind could pick up. "Sorry, uh, here…"

"Not, it's cool, uh…thanks."

He stood up, not meeting her eye as he straightened the pile of flyers

in his arms. Christine straightened the books in her backpack, and shuffled her feet. They stood there until the final bell rang inside, jolting them both.

"Sorry I made you late," he offered.

"Oh no, not you. I took Dustin all the way to school this morning, so I was already doomed."

Jonathan nodded. "Yeah, that's—that was probably a good idea."

"You skipping again today?"

"Yeah. My mom kinda needs me at home and the police still have a bunch of questions and stuff, so…"

"Hey, do…do you wanna give me some of the flyers?" she asked, gesturing at the stack. "I could put some up around school, maybe go down to the shops later. If you wanted some help."

"That'd be great, actually, yeah." He nodded, peeling off a few and handing them to her. "Thanks, Christine."

"Yeah, you got it." Christine nodded, fiddling with the strap of her bag. "If there's anything else I can do, let me know. I know all the boys are…well, Dustin's freaked. But Will's probably the smartest of all of them. So, if you need anything…or your mom or something…"

"Thanks," he said again. "Yeah, I—I will."

"Cool." She nodded again, backing away toward the school. "I'll see you around. Uh…hang in there."

She quickly ducked through the double doors, speed-walking toward homeroom. She scrunched up her face, wiggling her nose in an effort to shake the awkwardness that was clinging to her like a cobweb. She'd always kind of known Jonathan Byers, but they were a far cry from friends. And she felt for him, she did. But her morning definitely could have gone without that painful interaction.

"Miss Walcott," Ms. Snider greeted, pausing in her announcements as Christine slunk into the room. "Glad you finally decided to arrive."

"Sorry, Ms. Snider. Just trying to pitch in."

She held up the stack of flyers, and the woman's face immediately softened. "Alright, well try and keep it between classes next time."

"Yes, ma'am."

She hurried to her seat, waving off Barb and Nancy's concerned glances.

"Pitching in?" Barb echoed once they were all safely in the hallway.

"It worked, didn't it?" Christine picked out a poster, taking it up on a corkboard as they passed. "Free hall pass."

"Real classy," said Nancy dryly.

"Hey, I'm worried about Will. We all are. Besides, makes me feel better about my whole stinted conversation with Byers."

"Is that why you were late?" asked Barb.

"Nah. Ferrying Dustin to school, just making sure he got in okay."

"I still don't get why you don't just make it official and actually babysit him," she said, shaking her head. "I mean, with the amount of time you spend over there, you could make serious bank on that kid."

"Well maybe I just like pitching in," Christine replied with a grin. She dodged as Barb attempted to bump her into the lockers.

"Well do you have to pitch in tonight?" asked Nancy.

"I don't know yet. The boys are supposed to end up at your place."

"Do you wanna come with them? We could just hang out for a while, watch a movie."

"You sure?" Christine asked. "You don't have more…I don't know. Studying to do?"

"No," Nancy said quickly. "I mean, Kamisky's test is today, so. And I—I actually did a lot of studying last night so…I'm totally good to go.

Any movie. Your pick."

Christine didn't miss the insinuation, but no one seemed ready to acknowledge it plainly. Nancy's face remained hopeful, and Barb was suddenly extremely interested in the various flyers on the message board. Even when Christine cleared her throat, she refused to look at either of them.

"Uh, maybe," said Christine carefully. "Like I said, I'm kind of on Dustin duty. So it depends on the party."

"The party, right. I get it. Just let me know, okay?"

Christine nodded, peeling off toward her own class. The awkward cobweb feeling was itching at her again, but she pushed it aside. Things with Nancy would go back to normal eventually.

The rest of the day was relatively normal, until it was time for physics. She wasn't dreading it as much as yesterday. She hadn't been as firm with Steve as she'd intended to be, but she was certain she'd sent a clear message not to talk to her. If only to save her the pain of humiliation. They could go back to being minimally friendly lab partners, and that would be the end of it.

Mr. Austin already had lab supplies out when class began. Christine picked up a lab sheet and headed to her table, scanning through the assignment and collecting the materials they'd need. She decided to get started on her own, since Steve was busy at the next table over talking to one of his basketball teammates.

Lab periods were ideal because they were the only times you could actually have a conversation in class. With everyone talking at once, it was nearly impossible to tell who was talking about science and who was gossiping about the next big game. So long as the work got done, it didn't really matter. Most people loved that benefit. It didn't really matter to Christine, who rarely had anyone to talk to, and usually did most of the work.

"So, what are we doing today?" Steve asked when he finally joined her at the table.

"Magnetic lab. Compasses work based on the natural field of…"

"Psh, not the lab," he interrupted, propping his elbows on the desk. "I'm talking about you. What are you doing tonight?"

Christine paused, eyeing him. "…Why?"

"Well you're not the only one whose parents go away."

"No, Steve."

"Come on," he groaned, pulling the meter stick out of her hands. He twirled it lamely like a baton. "I know the last party you went to wasn't exactly phenomenal, but this is totally different."

"No, it's not." She tried to swipe the meter stick back, but he twirled it out of her reach. Christine huffed. "How is this any different?"

"Well, for one, it's me. And it's not gonna be a hundred people. Just four or five of us, chilling at my place. Tell me you're in."

"I'm out." She made another grab, but missed. "Steve, I'm serious. I'm not interested."

"Why not? It's gonna be fun."

"Why should I?" she demanded. "Hm? We don't talk, Steve. Why are you suddenly so interested in inviting me over to your place?"

"I told you," he said, looking slightly taken aback. "I think you need to loosen up."

"Thanks. I'll take it under advisement."

Christine leaned around him, seizing the measuring stick and slamming it back on the table. She turned back to the lab report and tried to find where she'd left off in the instructions. The words didn't make much sense when she was reading them so quickly, but anything was better than looking at that stupid, smug face.

Steve sidled around beside her. He shifted the various magnets on the desk aimlessly, then ducked his head closer to hers.

"Alright, you wanna know the real reason I'm inviting you?" he asked lowly. "But you gotta be cool. This is just between us."

Christine glared at him out of the corner of her eye.

"I'm serious, Christine. You cannot say anything."

"Fine. Why?"

"Nancy asked me to invite you."

"Nancy?" Christine looked up from the paper, finally turning to him. "You already asked her?"

"Yeah, this morning," he said with a shrug. "I told her I was having some people over, and she said that she didn't want to come if it was just gonna be me and my friends. I told her she could bring you and the other girl, but she said I had to ask you myself. And then that I wasn't allowed to tell you that she told me. Whatever that's about."

It took a few seconds for her rage to sneak up on her. But once it did, it was difficult to hide her fuming. Both her hands clenched into fists, and if she was squeezing any tighter, she might have ripped her paper in half. Steve must have noticed the warning signs, because he quickly waved a hand.

"Hey, that's not to say I don't want you to come. I wouldn't invite you if I didn't want you there. But Nancy was going on last night about how close you two are, and…"

"Last night."

She'd already known. But just like her conversation with Barb, she hoped he would correct her.

"Yeah," he said plainly. "I was at her place to uh…help her study."

Christine nodded, grinning furiously at her lab. She forced a deep breath through her lungs, and grabbed for the compass on the table. Science. She needed to do science.

But Steve grabbed her wrist and pried the instrument from her hands.

"Look, is it a crime to wanna hang out with my lab partner?" he asked. "No ulterior motives, no weirdness. I just figured it'd be more fun that way. You know, your friends and my friends."

He sounded earnest. But it was a tone she was getting used to. And this time, it wouldn't work.

"I get it, Steve," she assured him, her face composed in a sweet smile. "Seriously. I completely understand."

"Sweet. So you're coming?"

"Still no." Steve groaned, and Christine smiled wider. "You can tell Nancy I was very flattered and distraught, but I'm babysitting tonight. I'm sure if you ask nicely she'll still come."

"Babysitting?" He scoffed, tapping her on the nose with the compass. "Damn, Walcott. You really don't know how to relax, do you? Anyone ever tell you you're kinda a buzzkill?"

"Nope. Usually I'm such a buzzkill no one wants to talk to me." There was a beat of silence, and Christine eased the compass out of Steve's hands. "That was a joke."

"Oh, shit." He relaxed a bit, and Christine was amused to find a twinge of relief in his chuckle. "You had me going there for a second. I didn't know you could joke."

"Can we get back to the lab now? Please?"

Steve was reluctant, but eventually relented into doing the work. It was a pretty simple lab, a lot of repetitive work and recording numbers. Slide the magnet toward the compass, record. Slide the magnet toward the compass, record again. That was ideal for Steve, since it didn't require a lot of complex theories. It was ideal for Christine because she wouldn't be distracted from the fury that was brewing inside her chest.

When class was over, Christine headed straight to the gymnasium. She hadn't brought lunch today, but it didn't matter. She'd gladly go hungry if it meant skipping the cafeteria. She leaned back on the tiger mural, turning her Walkman on like she had the day before. For

a few songs, Billy Joel was loud enough to drown out the basketball game behind her. But there was nothing he could do to protect her from the nudge against her foot.

Christine stopped humming abruptly, opening her eyes to see a recognizable pair of brown loafers.

"Hey, Nance," she greeted, pulling her headphones down around her neck. "What's up?"

"You tell me," said Nancy. She peered down at Christine, her face not quite impartial. "You're the one skipping lunch to brood by the gymnasium."

"I'm not brooding," she defended. It was a weak argument at best. "How'd you find me anyway?"

"Wasn't hard. Figured I'd start in the last place you'd actually want to be, seeing as you're avoiding me."

Christine didn't bother arguing that point. She shrugged, stowing her Walkman away in her bag. "Just wanted some time to think."

"About?"

"I don't know, life? In case you haven't noticed, things have been a little hectic lately."

"Yeah, I guess they have." Nancy frowned. Her fingers wandered the strap of her messenger bag. "You know you can talk to me, though, right? If something's bothering you?"

Christine stared at her shoes—beaten, mud streaked tennis shoes next to Nancy's shiny penny loafers. The cobwebs were back, inching over her cheeks and prickling at the back of her throat. And after two days of swallowing her feelings, she finally snapped.

"When were you gonna tell me?"

"Tell you what?" Nancy asked, innocence slathered over the words.

"About the party. Tonight. Were you just gonna let me think that

Steve invited me for real? We were just gonna go to your house and you'd pretend you were just tagging along again? Until Carol or Tommy said something stupid, and then I'd make a scene in front of everyone."

"Christine, it wasn't like that," Nancy said imploringly. "Really! I just thought, you know, since you've been so upset the last couple days…"

"What? That asking your boyfriend to pretend to care about me was gonna make me feel better?"

"He's not my boyfriend," she said quickly. "And he does care. He said it would be fine! The more the merrier."

"Of course that's what he said to *you*."

Nancy leaned against the wall, and Christine could feel her looking down on her even though she didn't lift her head. The loafer nudged her knee this time, pleading.

"Then forget Steve. Do it for me. I really want you to come, Christine. You *and* Barb. I don't want to get stuck talking to Tommy and Carol again all night. It's gonna be so weird. I need you there. Please."

She wouldn't respond. She wouldn't look up.

The loafer kicked her again.

"Besides, it's a party at *Steve Harrington's* house," Nancy added with a giggle. "That's like your dream. You cannot turn that…"

"Will you *shut up*?"

Christine jumped to her feet, snatching up her bag and rounding on Nancy. She was still standing against the wall, shocked and floundering. It made derisive laughter bubble from Christine's throat.

"Don't you get it? Things are not the same anymore! We're not just gonna go back to normal!"

"Chris, what are you talking about?"

"You and Steve!" She carded both of her hands through her hair, gripping it at the scalp. "Are you even listening to yourself? We can't fangirl over him together like there's nothing going on. You can't use him as bait for me when you're already dating him!"

"I am not!"

"You're not *what*?"

"I don't—both! I'm not baiting you, and I am not dating Steve."

"No," Christine laughed. "So Steve didn't sneak into your room to hook up with you last night?"

Nancy flushed, clamping her mouth shut. But she did not argue. Christine sneered victoriously.

"Yeah, I bet you aced Kaminsky's test. For sure."

"He really did help me study," Nancy insisted. "He's not as shallow as you make him out to be."

"See, that's what I thought too. You know, I really thought he gave a crap. That somewhere behind all his popular friends and his jock persona, there was actually a nice person. But it's just a mask, Nancy. He's just asking me over to his house to make sure you feel comfortable enough to come. Just like he asked me to Jenny's party to get you there, or he visits me at work to make sure I do his physics labs. And now you're doing the same exact thing. You're just trying to play on my crush on him to get what you want. Looks like you and Steve have a lot more in common than I thought."

Nancy was staring at her, tight lipped.

"Look," she started, her words slow and controlled. "I know you're upset about Jenny Fischer's party. But you do not get to put that on me. You're supposed to be my friend. Would it kill you to be happy for me for like two seconds?"

"Oh my God!" Christine cackled again, spinning on the spot. She advanced on Nancy so rapidly that the other girl took a step back. "That is—That is rich. Because you know the best part? You don't

even care! You don't care how he used me so long as you're the one who gets to make out with him. How's that for friendship?"

"Oh, and you're so much better?" Nancy snapped. "You're not even mad at him!"

"Didn't you hear what I said? Yes, I…"

"No, Chrissy, you're not. Because if you really hated him, you wouldn't be this upset with me. So what? I'm supposed to hate him for what he did to my friend, and you get to forgive him cause he did it to you? And then you're the only one who gets to like him? Really convenient."

"It's not a switch, Nancy," Christine spat, glowering at her. "I can't just stop liking Steve, or just stop being hurt, or just stop being upset that he doesn't like me too. So I know you're waiting for me to break out the bouquet and confetti for you, but it's never gonna happen if you keep dangling your stupid boyfriend in front of my face."

"He's *not* my boyfriend! And I'm *not* dangling him!"

"Right, of course not. My mistake. What do you call tricking me into coming to another stupid house party so I can make an idiot of myself and you two can make out in front of me?"

"I was just trying to be nice!"

"Oh, like you were so nice at Jenny's party?"

"That was not my fault!"

"You didn't have to kiss him!"

"And he didn't have to kiss me!" Nancy finally took a step forward, lowering her voice to a near growl. "You're just jealous, Christine. And it's pathetic. You're jealous, and whiny, and pissed, because even though you spend so much time following him around and desperately trying to get him to notice you, Steve likes me and *not you."*

It hit her like a slap. Christine was certain she'd actually stopped

breathing. The momentary lapse of control must have been why her lip began to tremble, why her eyes began to fill with furious tears. She could not believe she was standing here, outside the gym, crying because of Nancy Wheeler of all people. What kind of idiot was she?

Nancy realized too late that she'd taken it a step too far. She muttered Christine's name, took another step forward, but Christine held up a hand.

"You're right," she managed, though the words were even shakier than her hands. "I am jealous, you're right. And maybe I am pathetic. But you know what? You're a bitch. Screw you, Nancy."

She turned and walked away. Nancy might have been calling her, but her pulse was so loud in her own ears that it was impossible to tell. She didn't have the energy to run, didn't have a destination in mind. She just walked away, praying Nancy wouldn't come after her, and that this time, she might be allowed a few minutes to cry in peace.

7. You May Be Right

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains situations with underaged drinking, and blood and drama as shown in *Stranger Things* 1.02. Please proceed with caution.

She was going to unplug the phone from the wall.

Christine had skipped the rest of her classes. She'd been home for hours, and it seemed like the phone hadn't stopped ringing. On one hand, she knew it could be important. Will was missing, and another glance at the news told her a man had been found dead at a diner near the edge of town. Dustin might be calling her, ready to give her all sorts of bad news. More likely, it was Barb or Nancy—and Christine didn't have enough energy to deal with any of those options.

But the constant ringing was starting to grate on her nerves. She had a strict regimen of moping to complete, barricaded in her room. The plan was to curl up in bed and listen to her cassettes until she cried herself to sleep—maybe with a small break for dinner.

Unfortunately, the phone had started ringing around four o'clock, now in perfect working order, and it hadn't stopped since. Christine had moved her phone to the floor, buried under laundry and pillows, and turned up the volume on her Walkman until the music was more piercing than enjoyable. It was all futile. The repetitive ringing kept weaving its way through the beats, insistent as the people calling.

The sound started up again, and Christine finally yanked off her headphones and dove for the floor. Pillows and sweaters went flying, and she fumbled with the receiver in rage.

"WHAT?"

"Woah! Hey! Everything alright, sweetheart?"

Christine shuddered. All her energy drained out from her as she collapsed into the pile of clothes on the floor. "Sorry, Daddy. Bad

day."

"I'll say." He chuckled, and the sounds helped to put her at ease. *"Can I ask who you were expecting?"*

"Nancy. Or Barb."

"And…we don't like them now?"

"I just don't want to talk to them," she huffed, pressing her face into a discarded pair of jeans. "It's all just stupid."

"Ah. So we've reached the years of teenage drama."

"Dad."

"No, it's alright. I knew they'd be coming at some point. So what's going on? Is this about a boy?"

Christine did not respond, which was as good as a written confession.

"Okay, that's a yes. Is it that boy you and Nancy are always talking about? Stephen something?"

"Steve," Christine said reluctantly. "His name is Steve."

"Alright, Steve." Her father cleared his throat on the other end of the line, and Christine wondered how much effort it was taking him to sound so casual. *"So what's the problem? You both like him?"*

"Well, Nancy's dating him now so…"

"Ah. Well then, he's an idiot."

"Dad!"

"Is that not what I'm supposed to say?"

"It's not that," she sighed. She rolled onto her back and kicked her feet up on the edge of her mattress. "Well, it kinda is. We weren't fighting about it at first, but now there's this party at his house or whatever, and Nancy's gonna drag Barb, which means Barb is gonna want me to go so she's not alone, only I don't wanna go because it's

gonna be awkward, and Steve and Nancy are gonna be all over each other, and I'm not gonna have any fun. But Nancy kept pushing me about it, because for some reason she doesn't get why I'm upset, and thinks we should just keep going on like nothing ever happened, even though Steve really hurt my feelings and she clearly doesn't give a crap. And then she started yelling, and I called her a bitch, and…now I'm avoiding all of them."

There were several seconds of silence, broken by small hums as her father processed the load of information. Ultimately, all he was able to come up with was, *"Sounds like you've been busy."*

Christine rolled her eyes, kicking her bed. "Yeah. You could say that."

"Alright, I don't want to get it wrong this time. What would you like me to say to make you feel better?"

"I don't know. How about that I have every right to be upset and I don't have to go to this stupid party?"

"Okay. You have every right to be upset. Teenage heartbreak is rough, and it's gonna take time to get over that. You might never recover. And that's okay. But I'm not sure you're right about the party."

"Excuse me?"

"Well, it doesn't sound like the worst idea. I think maybe you should go."

"…You want me to go to an unchaperoned house party with the boy that I have a crush on?"

"Just hear me out," he said with a smile in his voice. *"I know that you… well. You've always had trouble making friends."*

"Only because we moved so much," she said defensively. "You'd have trouble making friends too if you moved around the country three times a year."

"I did move around the country three times a year. We did that together."

"It's different when you're a kid."

"Alright," he conceded. *"We'll say you don't have a lot of practice keeping friends. And I think it'd be a shame to let some junior boy ruin everything you've built here."*

"It's not Steve's fault," said Christine, for what felt like the hundredth time. "It's Nancy. She's supposed to be my friend. She's supposed to care how I feel. And dating the guy we both like without talking to me doesn't really show a tremendous amount of concern for my feelings."

"Then think about Barb. You don't want to go to this party because you think it will be awkward. If she has to go without you, she's gonna suffer through that all alone. And to her, it will seem like you care more about being mad at Nancy than being supportive of her."

"Well maybe she should understand why I'm upset and not ask me to put myself in that situation."

"Maybe. But that's what friendship is about. Sometimes you've got to suffer through a stupid party to make your friend feel better, so that when you need it, they'll be willing to help you too."

Christine frowned, squeezing the phone cord in her hand. "Yeah…I guess…"

"And maybe it won't be so bad," her father added. *"Put on a brave face in front of Nancy and Steve, focus on hanging out with Barb. Show them you don't need either of them to have fun. Who knows? Maybe you'll walk out with a few more friends."*

"Dad," she snorted, "I don't think you'd want me to be friends with the people going to this party. I'm fine with the ones I've already got."

"You mean the two you're not talking to?"

"Nancy and Barb aren't my only friends. I've got…I don't know. Dustin."

"Wow," her father laughed. *"Well, I wasn't including twelve-year-olds in the count, but sure. How's Dustin doing?"*

"He's fine. Well, as fine as he can be, considering…I don't know if

you've been watching the news…"

"Yeah, I heard about the Byers kid," he said solemnly. *"Part of the reason I wanted to check in on you. Makes me feel a little better, at least."*

"You sure you want me going out and partying?"

"Nice try, kid. Crazy as it sounds, I'd feel better knowing you were with your friends than sitting at home alone. Least then someone's keeping an eye on you."

Christine pouted, and let her legs slip to the floor with a dull thunk. "Spoil sport."

"Just think about what I said, alright? You can go to this thing and still have fun. Your life doesn't depend on one guy, or one friend. It's about you."

"Yeah, okay. I'll think about it." She let out a slow breath, and pressed the phone closer to her ear. "I love you, Dad. Come back safe."

"I will. Love you too, bumblebee."

Reluctantly, Christine hung up the phone. She stayed on the floor for a few more minutes, watching the shadows growing on her ceiling. Lying in the mismatched pile of clothes, her father's voice still ringing in her ears, she almost managed to feel peaceful.

The phone rang again.

"Hello?"

"Finally! Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, Barb. Nothing a few hours of sulking couldn't fix."

"Listen, Nancy told me what happened, and…"

"Barbara, I love you, and I don't want to stick you in the middle of this. But if you're calling to ask me to see Nancy's side of things, I am actually going to explode."

"No, no," she said quickly. *"I'm with you on this. Nancy was way out of line saying that to you."*

"Oh. Well…thanks."

"Look, I'm still not sure how I feel about her dating Steve. But I know what she said to you was wrong."

"Well, she wasn't wrong," Christine said, picking at the phone cord. "It just hurt."

"I hate this." Barb's confession was sharp, and her voice broke as she gushed on. *"I hate that the two of you are fighting over some stupid jock. I hate that it's turning into some twisted competition. I hate that Nancy won't see reason, and that she's acting like some Carol wannabe. I hate that you're upset. It all just—It sucks."*

"Yeah. It sucks."

For a while, neither of them said anything. Christine turned back to the ceiling, where lights were dancing as a car drove by outside. She longed for a simpler time, when things weren't so complicated and tense. When Barb had first gotten her license and the three of them would cruise aimlessly for hours just enjoying the little bit of freedom and adulthood they had.

"Hey, do you wanna go to the drive-in?" she asked impulsively. "The one over in Grover? There's this new comedy that just came out with the guy from *Vacation.* We could get burgers, make ourselves sick on popcorn again. We could even swing by that diner you like on the highway. The one with the killer milkshakes?"

"That is such a low blow, Chris. I can't believe you're bribing me with milkshakes from Rockets."

"What can I say? You're my best friend, Barbara Holland. I know what you like. I just figured, you know, let's go out and do something. Forget any of this bullshit even happened. Escape Hawkins while we can."

"I can't," Barb sighed. *"Trust me, there's nothing I want more than a rainbow deluxe strawberry shake right now, but Nancy wants me to drive*

her. Part of me just wants to drop her off, but…I can't let her go over there alone. Even if she's being dumb."

Christine's heart clenched at the sadness in her voice. "Barb, I'm so sorry. I'd go with you, but…"

"No way. The way you left things with Nancy? Plus, Tommy and Carol are gonna be there. I wouldn't want you to do that. I'll be fine."

Barb's voice was calm and sympathetic, but Christine could still hear the twinge of regret that came with them. She hesitated, stretching the phone cord between her fingers as she toyed with her next words.

"I was talking to my dad before," she offered softly. "He thinks I should go. Just chill with you and show them that I still know how to have a good time."

"Yeah, well your dad may be chill, but he's also a lunatic," Barb laughed. *"It's gonna be awkward enough for me. If you come, you'll probably be miserable. You don't have to do that for me."*

"Fair enough."

"I've got to go pick up Nance," she sighed. *"But if I survive I'll try and call you when I get home, okay?"*

"Sounds good. I'll talk to you later."

"Night, Chrissy."

Barb ended the call, and Christine returned the phone to its cradle. Barb was right. Going to Steve's party was almost certainly going to end in disaster. She and Nancy were both already on edge. Pushing them into the same room with a bunch of alcohol and a smiling Steve Harrington might as well be putting tin foil in the microwave. It would be explosive.

Christine tried to put it out of her mind. She got off the floor and placed the phone on the nightstand. She needed all the time to herself that she could get if she was going to face school tomorrow.

For an hour or two, she put on her music. She put away the laundry

that was on the floor, and straightened up the papers on her desk. The stack of missing posters sat forlornly in the corner. She'd been too depressed to go down to the shops to put up the rest of them. But she'd get up early and do it tomorrow, before school. Right now she was going to make some lame ass mac and cheese and watch a movie.

She sat on the couch, poking at the pasta in her bowl and glaring at the TV. She wasn't even sure what she was watching. She'd just turned the TV on and stared at the picture as she ate. Her father's words were still nagging at the back of her brain. Was she making this all about her? Was she being petty to put her needs over Barb's?

She stood up abruptly. She marched back to her room and grabbed the Walkman off of her bed, sliding the tape into the stereo instead. The guitar of "Big Shot" began blaring right where she left off, and Christine turned the volume up. It was loud enough that she could feel it in her bones. It was perfect.

She danced her way to the kitchen, throwing open the cabinets and pulling cups down onto the counter. She found her father's "I Heart New York" mug on the shelf, and fished out the silver key that was sitting inside. Then she walked over to the small cabinet in the corner, buried under a pile of unopened mail.

Her father hardly used the liquor cabinet, as far as she knew. He'd have a drink sometimes after a tough day at work, or on a Friday night to celebrate the weekend, but she'd never actually seen the inside of the cabinet. There were only a few bottles—some vodka and one or two bottles of wine. Christine pushed them aside, not wanting to repeat her experience with the punch. Instead, she opted for something new. She selected a medium flask of whiskey. Partly because it was already open, and partly because it said "cinnamon" on the label. That couldn't be too bad, right?

She was wrong, of course. The liquor burned her throat and made her eyes water the instant it touched her tongue. But it felt warmer than the slimy punch, so she shook herself off and forced another mouthful down her throat.

Christine focused on the music as she drank, singing and sliding

around her house. "Big Shot" bled into "Honesty," which she quickly fast forwarded through. "My Life" was much safer to belt, then "Zanzibar" and "Stiletto," and by the time *52nd Street* was petering out, Christine had drunk herself into a comfortable flush. She fumbled with her tapes, slipping in *Glass Houses* instead. The sound of breaking glass rumbled from her speakers, and Christine propelled herself up onto her bed to sing, the whiskey bottle her microphone.

"Friday night I crashed your party! Saturday I said, 'I'm sorry!' Sunday came and trashed me out again! I was only having fun! Wasn't hurting anyone! And we all enjoyed the weekend for a change! Wooh!"

Jumping to the floor, she nearly stumbled into her closet. She put her bottle aside and flung the doors open wide. She was met with varying flannels and sweaters, a few sundresses she rarely ever wore. A couple of days ago, she'd stared into the abyss for hours trying to find something she liked. Something everyone else would like. Today, she wouldn't be bothered. She grabbed a T-shirt and a pair of overalls, cuffing them at the ankle over her high tops. She probably should have grabbed a jacket, but after all the whiskey, she could feel her body temperature rising.

She giggled to herself as she changed into her new outfit. Her father was right. Screw Steve, and screw Nancy. It was clear that the only person in this town who cared about her was Barb. Christine would be damned if Barb went through this torture alone. She'd go to the party, and she'd show Steve and Tommy and Carol and Nancy exactly how much she knew about letting loose. She didn't need anyone to teach her how to have fun. She didn't need to follow anyone around or beg for attention. She was the farthest thing from pathetic.

Steve's house was a bit further away than Jenny Fischer's. Christine had never officially been there, of course, but she'd biked around the neighborhood enough to know where it was. There had been summers when she'd rode by nearly every day, hoping to catch Steve in the front yard, or hear him splashing in the pool with his friends.

But this time, she was biking right up the driveway and walking to the front door.

There was music blasting inside, some Trooper song she'd heard on the radio before. The volume cut dramatically when she rang the doorbell, and there was some scrambling inside. A few seconds later, the double doors swung open.

Steve's sheepish expression dropped instantly, traded in for one of confusion. "Christine, hey. I thought you said you were babysitting?"

"Yeah, well. I lied." She smiled, holding up the bottle of whiskey. "Sorry I'm late. I brought booze."

"Hey, alcohol's always a free pass. Come on in."

He stepped aside, letting her into the house. It was just as big as she'd imagined, a wide hall that led to a wide open living room. Through an arch she glimpsed a giant dining table, at least twice the length of her own. The stairs led up to a balcony, overlooking the living room and wrapping around the second floor. It was a fancy house for sure, pumped with money. It might have been the open space, but it almost didn't feel real.

"Do you live in a catalogue?" she asked, spinning around the living room.

"Eh, it's not that great." Steve patted her back, brushing past her. "We're all out back. You sure you don't need a coat?"

"Nah, I'm fine."

He cranked the stereo again as they walked by, and jogged out onto the patio with his hands in the air.

"Relax, everyone! It is *not* the cops."

"Then who is it?" Tommy laughed as Christine stepped out of the house, throwing his arms up in the air. "Ay, it's Psycho Bitch! What's up?"

"Hey, watch it," said Steve. He pointed at him in warning, and grabbed a beer from the twelve-pack by the pool. "Otherwise she won't let you have any of the good stuff."

Christine shook the half-empty bottle, earning herself an impressed onceover from Tommy.

"Damn, Walcott goes hard."

"Where'd you get it?" asked Carol, leaning into his side.

"My dad's liquor cabinet," said Christine with a shrug. "I'm not huge on beer."

"Oh, but you like whiskey now?"

Christine turned, not surprised to find Nancy frowning at her from one of the lawn chairs. She looked at least half as happy to see her as Christine had expected. Barb was sitting in the chair next to her, looking back and forth between the two rapidly. Like she was waiting to see who would pounce first.

"Figured I'd try something new," Christine said evenly. "Want some?"

Nancy pursed her lips. "I'm good. Thanks."

"Suit yourself."

"Yo, I'll take some," said Tommy, clearly oblivious to the tension in the yard.

Christine held the bottle out to him, and he rushed over to grab it. She waited until he was only two steps away, then spun out of his path, pulling the bottle to her chest.

"Oh, sorry. I thought you said Gobstoppers."

Carol snorted—either at the terrible joke or the even worse delivery. Either way, Tommy rushed her instead, scooping her up in his arms and pretending to throw her in the pool. Carol screeched loudly, and Christine used the distraction to plop down on the ground next to Barb.

"What are you doing here?" she hissed, leaning down to Christine's ear. "Are you insane?"

"I don't think so," Christine offered. "But you may be right."

She snickered to herself, only increasing Barb's concern. "God, you really must be drunk."

"I'm working on it." She bumped the whiskey into Barb's knee and took another sip. "But really. I was just sitting at home, you know, being *pathetic*. And I just figured if we were both gonna be miserable, we might as well suffer together."

Barb scoffed, but Christine caught the tiniest smile on her lips. She fully intended on cracking a few more jokes to draw it out into the open, but they were interrupted by a sharp hiss.

They both turned to see Steve standing by the edge of the pool, his mouth glued to the bottom of a beer can. His back arched as he drained it, the edge of his green sweater riding up above his hip. Christine held her breath instinctively, her own mouth agape. Barb jolted her with her knee, rolling her eyes.

The can clattered to the bricks, and Steve took a dramatic gasp of air as he collapsed in the chair next to Nancy. He whipped out a lighter, pulling a cigarette out from behind his ear and trapping it between his teeth.

"Is that supposed to impress me?" Nancy asked with a smirk.

Steve looked over at her, perplexed. "You're not?"

Nancy laughed outright. "You are a cliché. You do realize that?"

"You are a cliché," he countered, "what with your—your grades and your band practice."

"I am so not in band!"

"Okay, party girl. Why don't you just, uh, show us how it's done, then?"

Steve held out his pocket knife, offering it to Nancy with a smug smile on his face.

It was something she normally never would have done. Out of all of them, Nancy had always seemed the least susceptible to peer pressure. She did what she wanted, when she wanted, despite what anyone else thought about her. It had always been what made her such a great friend.

And Nancy might not have wanted to shotgun the beer. But she definitely wanted the boy holding it.

She took the knife from Steve, and Christine dropped her head. She wasn't here to watch Steve and Nancy hang all over each other. She'd come to hang out with Barb, to support her. She didn't even have to pay attention to Nancy if she didn't want to.

But Barb was watching too. It was almost impossible to ignore, as Steve chuckled some instructions and Nancy proudly waved him off. Tommy and Carol were laughing, wandering over to watch. Tommy crushed a beer can against his head, and it hit Christine on the shoulder.

Nancy pierced the can like an expert, and held it up to her mouth.

"Chug, chug, chug," Steve started to chant, Thing One and Thing Two quickly joining in. "Chug, chug, chug, chug!"

The yard erupted into cheers as Nancy finished, letting the can clatter to the ground and taking a bow. Carol was actually clapping, as Tommy absolutely lost his shit. Christine saw Barb roll her eyes, but didn't get a chance to mimic her before Steve cleared his throat.

"Alright, okay, you got me. You got me! One down, and *two* to go. Who's up next? Chrissy?"

Steve tossed her a can, which she barely caught by the tips of her fingers. Suddenly everyone's eyes were on her. And almost every one of them had the same look—haughty doubt.

Christine turned to Barb, her sole anchor. She gave an imperceptible shake of her head, her eyes pleading, and Christine bit her lip.

"I don't think so," she said, trying to laugh it off. "Not this time."

"Aw, come on," Steve groaned. "Chug, chug, chug…"

"Yeah, cause that went so well last time."

"You sure?" asked Nancy. She smiled, which made her look strange as she brandished the pocket knife. "It's like, super easy."

Christine forced herself to smile back. "Like I said. I'm all set."

She tossed the beer back at Nancy, and help up her personal bottle. She ignored Barb's hushed warning, tilting her head back and taking one, two, three, four gulps of the amber liquid. It was a miracle she didn't gag or vomit, especially when Tommy clapped her on the back so hard it hurt. But she swallowed hard, enjoying Nancy's infuriated shock even if she hated the taste of the alcohol.

"Alright, take it easy there, badass," Steve chuckled, holding his hands up in surrender. "If someone gets sick on the carpet my mom's gonna skin me."

"Barb, you wanna try?" asked Nancy, offering her the beer can.

Barb stared at the foreign object, looking at Nancy incredulously. "What? No."

"It's fun!"

"No, I don't want to. Thanks."

"Come on," said Nancy in a singsong voice, and the rest of the teens began laughing around her.

"Nancy," Christine snapped, sitting up a bit straighter. "She said no."

"Nance, I don't want to."

"It's fun! Just try…"

"Nancy, knock it off."

"Just give it a shot."

"What the hell, Nancy? *Back off!"*

The laughter around them stopped abruptly as Christine got to her feet. She was steadier than she thought she'd be, possibly because her body was full of more rage than alcohol. She glared at Nancy, whose surprise was already morphing back into annoyance.

"She said she didn't want to," Christine said clearly. "So stop."

"I was just asking if she wanted to do it."

"No, you were telling her to do it, in front of a bunch of people she doesn't know."

They glowered at each other, everyone watching with rapt attention. Tommy giggled into the silence.

"Uh oh. Cat fight. I got ten bucks on Psycho."

"You're so on," Carol snorted.

"You know what?"

Christine rounded on them, fully ready to charge, fully ready to grab Tommy H by the shirt and figure out the rest later. Anything if it meant she didn't have to hear his stupid wheezing laugh or Carol's nasally voice for the rest of the night. Luckily, Barb intervened.

"Hey! Christine, it's fine, hey." She grabbed her arm before she could get more than a few steps, and quickly got to her feet. "It's whatever. I'll try it."

She took the can and pocket knife from Nancy, shuffling into an open space on the patio. Christine was steaming, and if she hadn't been, she would have started when she saw Steve and Nancy exchange a small smile—like they were proud of this, like they were excited for the show.

Barb inspected the can of beer, tilting it in her hands. "So what, you just…?"

She angled the knife, pushed, and missed.

The can fell to the ground with a heavy thud, and Christine rushed

forward to grab Barbara's arm as she doubled over. She was gagging, and a moment later, so was Christine—Barb's hand was beginning to spew dark red blood.

"Gnarly," Tommy chuckled, peering over Christine's shoulder.

She elbowed him square in the stomach. "Shut the fuck up, Tommy."

There was no time to cherish his groan of pain as Nancy hurried forward, trying to take a place at Barb's side. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"Barb, you're bleeding."

"I'm fine," Barb insisted, though she shirked away from Nancy's hand.

"Yeah, clearly," Christine scoffed. She wrapped an arm around Barb's shoulder, turning to Steve. "Where's your bathroom?"

"Oh, it's uh—it's down past the kitchen, to the left." He scrambled out of his seat, shadowing them to the backdoor. "You got it? You good?"

"We're good," she said tersely, and pulled Barb inside of the house.

Christine marched down the hallway, half-dragging Barb in her urgency. They passed the ornate, overly-pristine kitchen and turned left, where a small bathroom was tucked in the corner. She pushed Barb onto the toilet seat and began rifling through the drawers, looking for some kind of gauze or bandages.

"Chrissy, I'm fine," Barb winced, cradling her hand close to her chest. "You should go back to the party. It's okay."

A loud splash punctuated her sentence, followed by shrieks of laughter. Three more bodies hit the water, and then the incessant sound of giggles and whooping.

Christine rolled her eyes. "Yeah, they sound real broken up about it. Let's get you cleaned up."

She ducked under the sink, sifting through loose rolls of toilet paper

and bottles of mouthwash and cans upon cans of some kind of designer hairspray. In the back she finally managed to find a bottle or rubbing alcohol, but nothing to actually cover the wound. She huffed, standing up too-quickly and swaying on her feet. She froze as her vision clouded—the brightly lit marble bathroom disappearing in a static gray haze.

Barb's free hand closed around one of her wrists. "Chrissy? You okay?"

"Yeah, fine. Just—Just—Fluids."

"What?"

Christine squeezed her eyes shut, waiting for her sight to return before she ducked out of the bathroom. She felt like she was gliding as she doubled back to the kitchen. The fridge offered nothing that would be immediately helpful, so she moved onto the cabinets to find a glass. She poured herself some tap water and chugged. It wasn't as immediately helpful as it had been when Dustin poured it for her. Still, she hoped that it might do her some good later. The memory of Cheerios flickered in her brain, but she wasn't prepared to go foraging in the Harringtons' kitchen for food.

She grabbed a dish towel off the counter, and headed back to the bathroom, still feeling unsteady.

Barb had left her seat, and was rinsing her hand in the sink. She gasped a bit as she poured the alcohol over it, muttering a soft curse.

Christine handed her the towel. "How bad is it?"

"It's fine."

"Barb, stop deflecting. You might need stitches. I could drive you to the hospital if…"

"No way," Barb laughed, catching her eye in the mirror. "I'd rather live, thanks."

"Hey," she pouted, crossing her arms. "I am *not* a bad driver."

"Even if you did have a license, you're drunk as a skunk, Chris. That's enough for me."

"Even if the alternative is losing your hand?"

"They won't cut off my hand. My thumb, at most."

Christine watched as Barb wrapped her hand in the dish towel. It was rapidly turning red, offering almost no help to the injury, but Barb still strained a smile. Her hand was gushing blood, and she was still standing, laughing at her own jokes and trying not to cause any problems.

"I'm sorry," Christine said weakly, and Barb shook her head.

"It's not your fault. I stabbed myself."

"I know, but…you were rushing cause I was pissed, and I was pissed cause Nancy was pushing, and she probably wouldn't be such a hardass if I wasn't here. So I'm sorry."

"It's whatever."

"Seriously, Barb. I'm so…"

"You don't have to apologize," she said resolutely, turning to face her head on. "I know you feel bad. If you didn't, you wouldn't have come to this stupid party."

"Yeah. Guess that was a pretty stupid move, huh?"

"You may be right." They both chuckled wryly, and Barb nodded. "But I appreciated the gesture."

"God," Christine scoffed, kicking the sink. "I can't believe these people are this rich and don't have a freaking first aid kit. Does no one in this family get papercuts?"

"You could always ask." Barb pushed her, cutting her off before she could even argue. "Go on. I bet Steve looks like a drowned rat with his hair wet."

"Yeah, right."

Reluctantly, Christine left her in the bathroom. Everyone else was already beginning to file into the living room, wrapped in towels but still sopping wet. Apparently, not even a heated pool was enough to stave off the cold of early November.

"I'm freezing," Carol complained as Steve turned the music down.

Tommy hummed, backing down the hallway with a smirk. "Well, I heard his mom's room has a fireplace."

He and Carol ran away giggling and Steve yelled after them. "Are you kidding? Okay, well, you know, you are cleaning the sheets!"

Christine coughed to cover her gag, alerting the other two to her presence.

"Chrissy, hey," Steve said, ruffling his hair with his towel. He looked more like a movie star than a drowned rat. "How's Barb?"

"Fine, uh…do you have a first aid kit? I couldn't find anything downstairs."

"Oh yeah, sure. Just gimme a sec."

He winked at Nancy and jogged out of the room, his feet pounding on the stairs. They both watched him round the balcony, and disappear into one of the rooms on the second floor.

Nancy cleared her throat. "So…Barb's okay?"

"She's insisting she's fine," sighed Christine. "I offered to drive her to the hospital, but she won't budge."

"Ha, well…I'm sure it's not that bad."

"Yeah, well, you didn't really look at it, so…"

Nancy stopped laughing, but the smile remained. It was a bitter expression, exasperated, proud. Nancy pulled the towel tighter around her shoulders.

"You know, I'm—I'm cold, so I'm gonna go change."

"Yeah. I think you should do that."

Nancy nodded, not bothering to hide a disbelieving scoff. She barged out of the room, heading after Steve.

"Chris? Did you find…? Nance." Barb appeared at Christine's shoulder, rushing past her to follow Nancy down the hall. "Nancy? Where are you going?"

Christine trailed after them, looking up at Nancy as she paused on the stairs. She turned to face them, smiling innocently, obliviously, happily.

"Nowhere! Just…upstairs. To change. I fell in the pool."

"Well you're coming back, right? I mean, Christine just got here."

"Yeah, late," said Nancy. "I don't know what we're doing. We'll figure it out."

"You don't know, right," Christine said tightly. "And what about Barb? Do you care about her at all?"

"Chris," Barb scolded.

"I'm not a doctor, Christine," Nancy snapped, glaring down. "She said she's fine. I don't know what you expect me to do about it."

"I expect you to care! Or at least pretend. But I guess that's a pretty tall order these days, since you're in such a hurry to get to Steve's room and *figure things out."*

"Christine!"

She pursed her lips, and she and Nancy were still glowering at each other when Steve came back to the balcony. He hesitated, looking nervously between the two of them. At a loss for anything to say, he held up the first aid kid.

"Hey, I uh…found this under my sink. I'm not sure how old it is, but

uh…there should be some bandaids in there or something."

"Thanks, Steve," said Barb, nodding awkwardly.

He tossed the kit down to her, still watching them curiously. He stepped over the Nancy, tucking her hair back behind her ear. "Hey, you okay? I've got a sweatshirt if you want."

Nancy's eyes never left Christine's, but she reached up and grabbed Steve's hand, lacing their fingers together.

"Yeah, you know, that'd be great." She turned to smile at him, and took a few steps down the hall before she turned back. "Barb, I can probably catch a ride home if you want to head out."

"Nance…" Barb looked at her pleadingly, unable to say anything else in front of Steve.

"Really! I'm fine. I think you should take Christine home."

Nancy's eyes drifted to Christine again, and she set her jaw—defiant. Then she squeezed Steve's hand, and let him lead her down the hallway to his room.

Christine stared at the empty balcony. Her chest felt like it had been hollowed out, and was preparing to cave itself in.

"Chrissy…Chris, it's okay."

She didn't notice she was crying until Barb brushed her shoulder. It instantly became impossible to stop.

"Sorry. I'm sorry," she choked, rubbing furiously at the tears on her cheeks. "Fuck. I'm so sorry."

"Hey! Hey, it's okay! Christine, it's fine!"

Barb herded her away from the stairs, back into the living room so she could collapse on the couch. It was hard to breathe. It was hard to think. She knew she was over-reacting, that she was drunk and too fragile to think straight. But every time she thought it, she became more infuriated with herself, and began to sob harder.

And on the floor next to her was Barb, whispering comforting words, stroking Christine's hair with her uninjured hand. It made her feel all the worse. She should be comforting Barb, not the other way around. She didn't deserve to be comforted—no more than barb deserved to be sitting on the floor bleeding in a stranger's house. Barb should be at the hospital, or at home where her hand never would have been injured in the first place. Not holding Christine's hand as she her sobbing turned to sniffling, her sniffling to yawns.

Christine kept trying to say this, but it was difficult. Barb must have understood though, because she'd simply hush her and squeeze her hand a little tighter.

She had been stupid to come to the party. She'd said she was going to support Barb, but it had never been about her. It had all been about winning. It was about sticking it to Nancy because she was been hurt. She'd made it all about herself anyway.

In the end, it was all Christine's fault.

8. Part of the Party

It was six o'clock when she woke up by rolling off the couch and onto the floor.

Christine jolted awake with a groan, looking around at her dark surroundings. Her eyes were drawn to the glass patio doors, where the pool was still glowing a brilliant turquoise. Beyond that was black forest, trees stretching up into a purple sky that was still dark—but just light enough to tell her she was on the wrong side of midnight.

Her stomach did several consecutive somersaults. First, when she realized how late it must be. Second, when she remembered where she was. Next, when she realized how much trouble she was going to be in when she got home. Then, when she remembered her father wasn't home, and she was in the clear. But if it was so late, or early, where was everybody? Who the hell had let her fall asleep alone at Steve Harrington's house? Where was Barb? Where was Nancy?

And then the nausea hit her.

Christine scrambled to her feet, fighting against the blanket that had twisted itself around her ankles. She stumbled through the kitchen and into the bathroom, barely able to close the door before she collapsed to her knees on the tile. She promptly hurled everything that was sloshing around in her stomach directly into the toilet.

It was a while before she was able to stand. She pulled herself up by the counter, splashing some water on her face and combing her fingers through her hair before she dared to look in the mirror. Considering she'd heaved her stomach raw, it could have been worse. She didn't look much more wrecked than she had the night before, anyway, if a bit blearier. Maybe drinking water before she'd passed out had helped after all.

Another wave of sickness washed over her, and she white-knuckled the marble counter. She should have scavenged for some Cheerios.

She forced herself out of the bathroom, clutching her head as she walked back to the living room. She picked the blanket up off the

floor, folding it so it could be draped along the back of the couch. It occurred to her that she hadn't fallen asleep with a blanket. Someone must have grabbed one while she was asleep. Probably the same someone who had left a glass of water and two aspirin on the coffee table. In other words, a saint.

Christine pounced on the medicine. She threw the pills back and then glanced at the time on the wall, squinting until the hands finally came into focus. Her frown deepened. Where was everyone?

Cautiously, she headed out onto the patio. She shivered, wishing she had brought the blanket. With the alcohol mostly out of her bloodstream, there was nothing to protect her from the biting morning air.

Everything was exactly where they'd left it. Empty beer cans still scattered the patio, Steve's pocket knife glinting in the low light by the edge of the pool. Christine glared at the dwindling bottle of whiskey by the lawn chairs. Just looking at it made her want to start hurling again.

"Barb?" she called softly, peering around the yard. "Nancy?"

There was no response.

Christine walked an entire lap of the pool. She wasn't entirely sure what she was looking for. Someone asleep in the bushes? Someone ready to jump out and yell "surprise"? Whatever it was, she didn't find it, and she headed around to the front of the house.

Tommy's car was nowhere in sight, nor was Barb's. That didn't mean much. Christine couldn't remember seeing it the night before, either. Knowing Nancy's paranoia, they'd probably parked a few blocks away and walked, though without knowing where, it was impossible to check. She doubted either of them would have spent the night at Steve's, what with their parents being home. But that left another unnerving question. Why had they left her behind?

A car pulled out of the driveway next door, the driver giving the horn a short blast in farewell to their family in the doorway. Christine jumped, and glanced at the house behind her. If Hawkins was

beginning to wake up and start the day, there was only one thing she needed to be concerned about—getting the hell off Steve Harrington's property.

She hopped on her bike, taking off as fast as her growing headache would allow. She was freezing, but it helped with the nausea, and seemed to stall the stabbing pain in her temples.

By the time she pulled in her driveway, the sky had already shed several shades of blue. The streetlamps were off, and the lights were flicking on inside most houses on the street.

Christine ducked inside her own home, and leaned her back against the door. The darkness was comforting, even if the scenery wasn't. Cups were still strewn across the kitchen, her unfinished dinner abandoned in the living room. Glad as she was to be home, it felt like a lifetime since she'd walked out the door—so confident that she was going to salvage a bad night.

Well. That had been a colossal mistake.

She made her way to the bathroom so she could brush her teeth, then parked herself on the floor. She was fairly certain she wouldn't have to vomit again, but she'd been wrong before. She felt weak, and she didn't want to risk having to run for it from her bed. Her limbs felt so dead that the floor wasn't much less comfortable anyway. She stretched to snatch her hairbrush off the back of the toilet, and started working on the knots in her hair. The sun began to rise outside, and she watched the stripes of sky pale in the slots of her blinds.

Once the sound of passing cars had become a bit more regular out on the street, Christine figured it would be safe to move. She walked to the kitchen, grabbing the box of Cheerios out of the cabinet and stuffing a handful in her mouth. Then she moved to the wall phone. She pinned the handset on her shoulder and plugged in the number, rushing to swallow before anyone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Holland. It's Christine."

"Oh, good morning, Christine! You're calling awfully early."

"I know. I am so, so sorry. Has Barb left for school yet?"

"Well, Barbara's not here," she answered, a curious tilt in her voice. *"She said she was staying at the Wheeler's after the special assembly last night. I figured you'd be there as well."*

"Right," said Christine, switching gears. "I actually had to bail because I wasn't feeling well. That's why I was calling. To ask her to bring home my schoolwork and stuff. I just thought she'd come home before heading to school."

"Nope. But you could always try the Wheelers? I'm sure they haven't left yet."

"Yeah. Thanks, Mrs. Holland. I'll do that."

"Alright. Feel better, sweetheart!"

"Thank you. Bye!"

Christine hung up the phone, and promptly walked away. She had no intentions of calling the Wheelers. She did not need to start her day with that kind of drama.

A slam outside caught her attention, and she wandered to the window with her cereal.

"I have to go, Mom!" Dustin was yelling, sprinting to his bike with even less grace than he normally had. "Mike's gotta show me something before school! It's for the party! It's for science! It doesn't matter! I'll see you later!"

Christine furrowed her brow, hurrying to the door as Dustin struggled with his kickstand.

"Yo!" she called from the doorway. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Wheelers," he shouted, not even bothering to look up at her. "Then school! Bye!"

"Alright, well give me a minute. I'll bike with you."

"NO!" Dustin slipped in his urgency and the bike toppled underneath him, threatening to throw him to the ground. "Uh, I mean, don't worry about it. It's fine. Don't follow me. We're cool."

"Dustin, I said…"

"And I have AV club after school, so don't worry about picking me up! Or dropping me off! Or following me! Bye, Christine!"

He raced out of the driveway and into the road, leaving a dumbfounded Christine on her front lawn. Dustin was weird at the best of times, but that…that had been peak levels of weird.

There was no internal debate. Christine dropped the box of cereal inside the door, grabbed her bike, and set off after Dustin.

Years of biking aimlessly around Hawkins had left her with a pretty good knowledge of the town. She knew the path Dustin usually took to Mike's, and knew that she'd have to beat him there if she was going to get any answers. She hopped a curb, coasting through the elementary school playground and spitting out the other side. She also cut through a side yard, which deposited her nicely on Maple Street, just a few houses down from the Wheeler house.

Christine went past the front door, pulling up instead on the grass beside the house. Mike and Lucas were waiting outside, standing guard to the side door of the Wheelers' basement. Both boys jumped to attention when they saw her, assuming very casual positions of pin straight posture with their hands behind their backs.

"C-Christine!" said Lucas, laughing nervously. "Uh, hey! What's up? Are—Are you here for Nancy?"

"Nope."

"Oh, uh, okay. Then what are you doing here?"

"I don't know, guys." She did not dismount, but folded her arms on top on the handlebars. She watched coolly as the boys fidgeted. "Why don't you tell me what I'm doing here?"

"What is that supposed to mean?" Mike snapped. "Just get lost, Christine!"

"Ouch. Someone's jumpy."

"I'm not jumpy. You're just annoying."

"Oh, for sure. But that doesn't mean you're not hiding something." She turned her eyes on Lucas, who was already staring away from her. "Lucas?"

"Hm?"

"Do you wanna tell me what's going on?"

He was smart enough to avoid her gaze. He looked at anything and everything else—the trees, his shoes, the siding on the Wheelers' house. It made it easier for him to keep his mouth shut tight.

Christine frowned, and checked the front door. She didn't want to risk running into Nancy, but she didn't trust the boys' innocent looks. Something was going on, and she did not want that on her conscience when shit hit the fan. But Mike was a stubborn kid, just like his sister. She doubted there was anything she could say to make him budge.

"MAYDAY! MAYDAY! HOUSTON WE HAVE A HUGE PROBLEM!"

Mike facepalmed, and Lucas groaned. Christine, however, broke into a wide smile as Dustin raced onto the lawn.

"Guys! Chrissy saw me leave my house and—and…" Dustin braked, gawking at her. He looked around wildly. "Christine? Where…? How did you…?"

"Shortcut."

"What shortcut?"

"A new one."

Mike rolled his eyes. "How can you make a *new* shortcut?"

"Will you show me?" asked Dustin.

"Maybe," Christine said with a shrug. "If you tell me what's going on."

The boys exchanged dubious looks.

"Party meeting," Dustin announced, dropping his bike so he could join the other two at the door.

They formed a small huddle, all with their backs to her. Still, it wasn't exactly Fort Knox.

"I think we should tell her," she heard Lucas say, and Mike's frame sagged as he rolled his eyes.

"Shut up, Lucas."

"Don't tell me to shut up!"

"You're only saying that because it's *Christine."*

"Mike, I think he's right."

"What? No way! We said no grown-ups!"

"Christine's not a grown up," Dustin argued. "She's just more grown up than us."

"Yeah! Maybe she'll know what to do!"

"She's *not* gonna know what to do," Mike argued. "All she's gonna do is call the police, which is why we said *no grown-ups!"*

"Her dad's not home," Dustin said suddenly.

"What?"

"Her dad's on a business trip. That means her house is empty. We can use that! It can be like safe haven!"

"We don't need a safe haven! We need to find Will!"

"You guys know I can hear everything you're saying, right?"

They turned around to look at her. Christine sighed and climbed off her bike, walking it over to the side of the house. She looked at them each in turn, taking in their apprehensive faces.

"So this is about Will, huh?"

"Yeah," said Dustin sheepishly.

"Look, I meant what I said the other day," she reminded them. "I don't think you guys should be running around looking for him on your own. So if you're gonna do something, you can talk to me. I'm not gonna tell on you."

"See?" said Dustin, elbowing Mike. "Chrissy's cool!"

This did not seem to ease Mike's nerves. He stared stubbornly at Christine, not budging until Lucas laid a hand on his shoulder.

"Mike. Come on, man. We are way out of our depth here. Plus, she's a girl."

Christine was not sure what relevance this had, but it seemed to matter to Mike at least. He looked to Lucas and Dustin, unenthusiastic, but outnumbered.

"Fine," he huffed, rounding on Christine. "Fine, we'll tell you. But you cannot tell anyone."

"Okay."

"No, you have to promise."

"Why?"

"Because it's important!"

"Woah, okay…"

She held her hands up in surrender, looking back and forth between the boys. She expected at least one of them to be snickering, amused by her reaction. But each of them looked as solemn as the next. Whatever it was they were doing, they were taking it seriously.

"Okay, fine," she agreed. "I promise."

Mike considered her for a moment before he took a step back. He nodded at Dustin to go ahead.

"Alright, so you remember yesterday when you asked me if we found anything when we went looking for Will?"

"Wait," Lucas said, holding up a hand. "You told her we went looking for Will?"

"Psh, give me some credit. I didn't tell her. She guessed." Dustin rolled his eyes, turning back to her. "*Anyway*, remember how I told you were didn't find anything that would help us?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, turns out I was wrong." He beckoned her over to the side door, and paused with his hand on the handle. "You're gonna be cool, right?"

Christine wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, whatever. I'll be cool."

Dustin opened the door, and Christine followed the boys inside.

She'd never spent much time in the Wheelers' basement. It was mostly Mike's domain—used almost exclusively for Dungeons and Dragons and game nights. She'd been issued a free pass a few times, when she pitched in with a campaign or sprung to buy pizza and soda. There was a blanket fort in the corner, and the walls were covered in maps and drawings of different characters they'd created. Christine noted the large poster of *The Thing* with pride. She'd given it to Mike when the film closed at the theater the previous year.

She stopped short when she looked at the couch.

"Christine, this is Eleven," said Mike, stepping up to the sofa. "We found her in the woods while we were looking for Will. El, this is Chrissy."

The girl on the couch looked up. She was small, and seemed even smaller in the oversized sweatshirt and sweatpants she was

borrowing. Her hair had been shaved short, and her big brown eyes were open wide. She tugged her knees closer to her chest, looking apprehensive.

"Um…hi," Christine said uncertainly.

The girl did not say anything.

"She's quiet," Dustin explained.

"No kidding," said Lucas.

"Okay. And you know her how?"

"We found her," Mike repeated. "She was wandering in the woods, the night it stormed. When we went to go find Will."

"Right. What was she doing there?"

"We don't know."

"…okay. Where did she come from?"

"We…don't know."

Christine narrowed her eyes. "Where's her family?"

Mike did not seem willing to answer, so Lucas chimed in. "We don't know that either."

"Great," said Christine. She folded her arms over her chest. "And your mom was just…cool with that?"

The boys all looked at each other. This time, no one was brave enough to answer.

Christine looked back to the girl on the couch, and her jaw dropped.

"Oh no. Oh no, no, no, no, no…"

Dustin jumped in front of her, waving his hands wildly. "Hey, hey, hey! Christine! Christine, come on. You said you'd be cool. You promised you'd be cool!"

"Yeah, Dustin, that was before I knew Mike was harboring an actual human child in his basement!"

All three boys shushed her, glancing nervously up the stairs at the door to the Wheelers' kitchen. Against her better judgment, Christine lowered her voice to a hiss.

"Explain. Now." They all began talking at once, and Christine quickly held up her hands. She fixed her sights on Mike, jabbing a finger into his chest. "You. Go."

"I told you," he said. "We went out to Mirkwood to look for Will. It started raining, we heard something in the bushes, and we found El. It was cold, so we brought her back here so she could change into dry clothes."

"And what? Now she's living on your couch?"

"I know that sounds bad," Dustin interrupted, "but it's been two days and she hasn't killed us. So she's not crazy!"

Lucas whacked Dustin in the stomach to shut him up.

"Both of you knock it off," Christine snapped. "This is insane!"

"She was scared," Mike defended. "She said there were bad people after her, people who wanted to hurt her."

"Which is exactly why you should have gone to the cops!"

"We can't! El said that if we told anybody, the bad men would come after us too."

"Oh great," she scoffed, throwing her hands up. "So let's just bring her right on in!"

"What were we supposed to do? Leave her out there to freeze to death? Let her get caught?"

Christine groaned, and pressed a hand to her forehead. She knew his heart was in the right place—knew that in the same situation, she'd probably have done the same thing—but this was insanity. She was

not prepared to deal with it this early in the morning.

"Okay, back up," she tried. "We can't go to the cops because…?"

"Because of the bad men," Dustin supplied.

"And how are the bed men gonna know if we call the cops? What if we just leave an anonymous tip or something?"

"We can't," Mike sighed in exasperation. "The bad men are powerful! They've got eyes everywhere! If we take El to the station, they're gonna find her. She has to stay hidden."

"And what does this have to do with Will?"

"She saw him," said Dustin. "Or at least, we think she did."

"You *think* she saw him?"

"Yeah," said Lucas, somewhat snidely. "Like we said. She's *quiet."*

"She pointed at his picture," Mike insisted. "She singled him out of my picture of the science fair and said his name!"

"Mike, Will's picture has been everywhere," Christine reasoned. "He's been in the paper, on the news. His brother put wanted posters on every flat surface in town. She could have seen him anywhere."

"No. She knows what happened to him, I know it! Last night she told us he was hiding."

"Hiding," she repeated. "From the bad men?"

Christine did not like the looks they exchanged at that.

"Seriously, guys, just spit it out. It cannot be worse than what you've already told me."

"He's not hiding from the bad men," said Dustin. "He's hiding from the Demogorgon."

"He is not hiding from the Demogorgon," Lucas groaned. "The Demogorgon isn't real!"

"Oh, okay, then what is it?" Dustin countered mockingly. "Mike asked her who Will was hiding from, and then she *slammed* the Demogorgon onto the board. He's hiding from the Demogorgon!"

"The board?" Christine's eyes flicked to the table, where the D&D board had been flipped upside down. It clicked, and she hounded them in an outrage. "Are you kidding me? If this is some stupid campaign, I swear to God I am going to make every single one of you…"

"It's not a campaign!" Mike insisted.

But Christine wasn't listening.

"What, so we're all real characters this time? And the fantasy has crossed into our world, and El is just some rogue you picked up along the way? Hm? Is she new at school? She's part of the party now?"

"She's not a rogue," said Dustin. "She's a mage!"

"She's not part of the party," argued Lucas. "She's not anything!"

"Um, obviously she's a mage. Hence the powers."

Dustin wiggled his fingers, and Christine deadpanned. "Powers?"

"Yeah," said Dustin. "Eleven has superpowers."

"Superpowers. Of course."

"No, really! Yesterday we were all arguing, right? And Lucas tried to go downstairs to tell Mike's mom about El, only he got to the door and then it slammed shut in his face! So he opened it, and it slammed shut again, and *then* it locked. And we were all like 'say whaaat!' And we turned around and she was standing there with blood gushing out of her nose all like 'no.'"

"It was not gushing out of her nose," Mike complained, which Dustin ignored.

"See? Look, I—I bet she could make this fly!" He darted across the room, unearthing a model of the Millennium Falcon from under a

blanket and holding it up in front of the girl. "Hey! Hey. Okay, concentrate, okay?"

The girl looked up from the radio she was examining, and watched with mild interest as Dustin dropped the spaceship directly onto the floor.

"Okay, one more time," he said brightly, retrieving the toy. "Use your powers, okay?"

He held it up, raised his eyebrows, and then dropped the it onto the floor again.

"Idiot," Lucas groaned.

Mike crossed the room, snatching the model off the ground and glaring daggers at Dustin. "She's not a dog!"

"She can do it," he insisted.

Christine shook her head. "Dustin, knock it off. That's enough."

"Chrissy, really! She can…!"

"I said that's enough!"

Dustin immediately clamped his mouth shut, and his eyes sank to the floor with guilt.

"Hey, El, it's okay."

Mike kneeled down next to the couch, ducking his head to catch the girl's eye. She'd curled up into a ball again, and for a moment Christine thought she'd been frightened by the noise of the toy. But "Eleven" wasn't looking at Dustin, or the spaceship. She was looking reproachfully at Christine.

"This is Chrissy," Mike explained gently. "She's our friend too. She's just here to look out for us, but…Chrissy won't tell anyone. Right?"

He turned to look at her expectantly. Christine did not answer.

She had no idea how the boys had gotten caught up in something so crazy, especially in a town like Hawkins. The superpowers were ridiculous, of course, but that didn't make it any less dangerous. The girl probably had abusive parents, or strict doctors she'd escaped from. She might even have been kidnapped. If that was true, Mike was right—they couldn't just leave her to fend for herself. Honestly, it was all the more reason to go to the police.

The girl looked up at her, the fear fading at Mike's reassurance. Her eyes were bright and curious, and inspected her from head to foot. Her gaze lingered on her face, and her lips pulled into a feeble smile.

"Pretty."

Christine's heart clenched, and in an instant, she knew all reason had gone out the window. She put her hands on her hips, repressing a groan.

"Oh, shit."

Dustin turned to her with a knowing smile. "So you'll do it? You won't tell anyone?"

"Yeah, okay. You're all insane, and I—I definitely kind of hate you, but okay. At least until further notice…I won't tell anyone."

"Awesome," said Mike, smiling for the first time. He beckoned them over to the game table, and waited until everyone gathered around to continue. "Okay, so Christine will wait until we leave to take El back to her house. We'll circle around on our bikes, and Eleven can take us from there. If we start at Mirkwood…"

"Nope, hold on," Christine said flatly. "You three are not skipping school."

"Seriously?" Lucas complained. "That's what you're worried about?"

"Will needs our help!" insisted Mike. "This is important!"

"What this is, is not up for discussion. Alright? I'll help you guys look for Will, I'll keep my mouth shut about your friend, who *apparently* has superpowers—whatever that's about…"

"It's true," said Dustin, but he ducked his head when she glared at him.

"You three are not skipping. We'll go after school. End of story."

"Fine," Mike said across from her. "But you have to keep El at your house for the day."

"What? Why?"

"She can't stay here alone! What if my mom tries to clean the basement? Or Holly comes down to play with some toys? If anyone finds her here, it's over!"

"Well what am I supposed to do with her?"

"You're a babysitter," said Dustin. "Just watch her. *Duh.*"

"Excuse me?" She glanced down at him, suspicious. "You hate it when I say babysitter."

"Yeah, well desperate times call for desperate measures. We have to keep Eleven safe, and your house is the only place we can do that. Suck it up, sister."

Christine wrinkled her nose. "Alright, fine. Not like I was going to school anyway."

"How come we have to go to school and you get to skip?"

"Because I'm the babysitter."

Christine stuck out her tongue, and Dustin opened his mouth ready to argue, but Mike slammed his hands on down on the table.

"Can I continue?" He glowered at both of them, daring them to interrupt, and then getting back to the point. "We'll just tell my mom we have AV club after school. That will give us at least a few hours for Operation Mirkwood."

"You seriously think the weirdo knows where Will is?" asked Lucas, shooting the girl a doubtful look.

"Weirdo?" Christine echoed. "I thought everyone was on board with this."

"Just because she knows stuff doesn't mean she's not weird."

"Will you stop?" Mike asked, glaring at Lucas. "Just trust me on this, okay?"

Lucas still didn't look convinced, but he nodded.

"Did you get the supplies?"

"Yeah." Lucas opened his backpack, and began piling items onto the table. "Binoculars, from 'Nam. Army knife, also from 'Nam. Hammer. Camouflage bandana. And—the wrist rocket!"

"You're gonna take out the Demogorgon with a slingshot?" Dustin asked on Christine's left, unimpressed.

"First of all, it's a wrist rocket. And second of all, I told you, the Demogorgon's not real. It's made up. But if there is something out there, I'm gonna shoot it in the eye, and blind it!"

He snapped the plastic toy with a victorious grin, but Christine was still eyeing the knife on the table.

"God, I am so uncomfortable with this."

"Dustin, what did you get?" Mike asked.

Dustin grinned, and dumped the contents of his bag out onto the table.

"Well, alrighty. So we got Nutty Bars, Bazooka, Pez, Smarties, Pringles, Nilla wafers, apple, banana, and trail mix. Oh, and some Pop Tarts."

"Hey, those are mine," Christine gasped, trying to snatch the box back from him.

"Yeah, you left your back door open last night. Don't do that."

"Seriously?" asked Lucas, looking down his nose at the food.

"We need energy for our travels," Dustin argued. "For stamina. Besides, I also brought Christine."

"On accident! That doesn't count!"

"Um, I'm pretty sure it counts. Because of me, we now have a safe home base. Hallow ground."

"How did you get to be so dumb?"

"You're the dumb one. Why do we even need weapons anyway? We have her!"

Dustin jabbed a finger at El, who had gone back to fiddling with the radio. Lucas groaned.

"She shut one door!"

"Yeah, with her mind! Are you kidding me? That's insane! Imagine all the other cool stuff she could do!"

"Okay, can we stop talking about the superpowers?" Christine pleaded, rubbing her temples. "I really need you to stop talking about the superpowers."

"Boys! Time for school!"

Everyone in the basement jumped at the sound of Mrs. Wheeler's voice, and scrambled into action. Dustin and Lucas began shoveling supplies back into their backpacks, and Mike beckoned Christine over to the couch. She went the long way, walking under the staircase just in case Mrs. Wheeler peeked downstairs to check up on them. Super-covert mission aside, she did not want Mike's mom announcing that she was hiding in the basement.

"You're gonna go with Chrissy," Mike was explaining to Eleven. "She'll take you back to her house. You'll be safe there."

"Safe?" the girl repeated.

"Yeah, safe. No moms, no dads. You can hang out all day, and no one will find you."

Eleven turned wordlessly to look at Christine, and Mike rushed to reassure her.

"You don't have to worry about Chrissy. She's cool. Sometimes."

"Wow. Thanks, Mike."

"Michael!" Mrs. Wheeler shouted again.

"I'm coming!" he screamed, and turned back to Eleven. "We'll be back before you know it. We'll come meet you at Christine's after school."

"After school?"

"Yeah. Three-fifteen."

She stared at him blankly, and Christine raised an eyebrow. "She doesn't know how to tell time?"

"I don't know," said Mike, already busy taking off his watch. "We don't really know how she grew up. She doesn't know a lot of things."

He gently took Eleven's hand, and fastened his watch around her wrist.

"Here. When the numbers read three-one-five, meet us in the backyard."

"Three-one-five," she repeated, nodding.

"Three-one-five," Mike agreed. He turned to Christine. "You got that?"

"Three-one—yes, three-fifteen. I got it, Mike."

He stood up, pulling on his coat but still hesitating by the stairs. "Just…Just look out for her, okay? She likes TV, and waffles, and—and she doesn't like loud noises."

"Mike, it's gonna be okay," said Christine. "I watch the three of you all the time. I bet you're way worse than she is."

"Shut up," he said, with a small smile. He looked at Eleven for a moment longer, then darted up the stairs. "See you guys later."

"Bye, Mike."

Christine turned to look down at Eleven, who was staring after Mike with such an unmasked expression of longing, it made her heart hurt again. She took a cautious step forward, ready for it when the girl flinched and shrunk back from her. Christine held up her hands.

"It's okay. Can I sit here?"

She nodded to the empty spot on the couch by Eleven's feet.

The girl considered her for a few more seconds, and tugged her legs closer to her chest. Then she nodded.

Christine made sure to move slowly. She eased herself onto the couch, and tried not to look at Eleven too much. She didn't want to make her uncomfortable by staring. That was hard, considering Eleven didn't seem to have the same consideration. Christine could feel those two big eyes boring holes into the side of her head. She knew she shouldn't take it personally. The girl was like a cornered animal, on high alert for any new threats. Still, her stare was a little unnerving.

"I'm Christine," she said, breaking the silence. "You can just call me Chrissy if you want. Is it okay if I call you El?"

The girl stared at her, and did not respond.

"Okay. Um, can I ask why the boys are calling you Eleven? Is that your real name?"

Nothing.

Christine nodded, looking around the room. She hadn't expected it to be quite this difficult to talk to the girl. She'd seemed comfortable enough with Mike, even if her words were short. But she'd already known Mike for a few days, it seemed. Christine was just going to have to start from scratch.

"Right. Well, we just have to wait until Mike's mom leaves the house. Then we can go outside and go to my house. It's not too far away. Do you know how to ride a bike?"

Eleven continued to stare at her blankly.

"O-kay. I guess we'll just…walk…"

Christine leaned back on the couch, letting out a soft sigh. She had a feeling it was going to be a very, very long day.

9. Humming Along

The journey to the Walcotts was, unsurprisingly, quiet. Christine walked alongside her bike, Eleven staying close to her on the other side. She always stayed on the curb-side. Every time a car passed, she would tense up and pull closer to Christine's figure, trying to stay out of sight. It was concerning, to say the least. Christine was tempted to take her shortcut, just to get the girl off the streets, but they couldn't risk walking through the playground this close to classes, especially if the girl was supposed to stay hidden.

They hurried up the driveway and into the house, Christine locking the front door behind her. For a moment, they both stood there, waiting. Christine half-expected someone to kick her door down, demanding to know who this little girl was and trying to take her away. But nothing happened. They had not been followed.

She glanced down, noticing the box of cereal she had abandoned on the floor. Sheepishly, she snatched it up. It was stupid to be embarrassed—especially when Eleven obviously had little to no concept of normality—but her presence was enough to make Christine nervous.

She cleared her throat, looking down at the tiny girl in front of her. "Um…are you hungry?"

Eleven did not meet her eyes, but timidly nodded.

Christine beckoned her into the kitchen. Cups and mugs littered the counter where she'd left them in her search for the key to the liquor cabinet. Eleven looked at them curiously, her head cocked to the side like a small puppy. Christine hurriedly tried to stuff everything back in the cupboard.

"Sorry, just uh…so! What do you want to eat? I've got some cereal, I can make eggs—pretty much only scrambled, though. Mike said you like waffles, right? I can't make them from scratch, but I might have some in the freezer."

She glanced over her shoulder to find Eleven staring at her with rapt

attention. Apparently "waffle" had been the buzzword to use.

"Yeah? Toaster waffles are okay?"

Eleven nodded.

Christine smiled and patted the counter, gesturing for her to have a seat on the other side before she started on breakfast. She found an unopened box of Eggos in the freezer, and grabbed some eggs from the fridge as well. She could at least pretend it was a balanced meal. She wasn't sure what Eleven might want to drink, and she doubted that asking her would yield any real results. So she just grabbed a bunch of things out of the fridge and laid them on the counter. If she was thirsty, she could help herself.

It didn't take long to cook the eggs, and the waffles were done in a matter of minutes. Christine split them two and two, and dropped them onto some plates. She pushed one toward Eleven and turned back to the stove.

"Okay, eggs are almost up. We've got salt, pepper, ketchup if you like that sort of thing. Oh! And syrup, let me get you some syrup. Here you…"

She trailed off, the bottle of syrup dangling from her fingers. Eleven froze and stared back at her. One of the waffles was already gone, the second paused halfway to her mouth. Maintaining eye contact, she slowly put it back down on her plate.

"Um…right. Okay." Christine picked up her plate, sliding her waffles on top of Eleven's. "Go crazy, kid."

The girl did not respond, and did not move until Christine's back was turned once more.

Christine made two more waffles for herself and finished the eggs. Eleven wrinkled her nose when Christine spooned some onto her plate, snatching up her stack of Eggos like she was afraid of contamination. Christine ignored her distaste.

She leaned on the counter across from Eleven, digging into her own food. It was difficult to ignore the feeling of being watched, studied.

But she did her best not to acknowledge it. She focused on her plate —systematically seasoning her eggs, cutting up her waffles, and then pouring syrup on top.

"You wanna try?" she asked, offering the bottle.

Eleven almost seemed offended. She clutched her plain waffles to her chest.

"Suit yourself."

They ate in silence. Eleven had slowed down a bit, nibbling on each waffle rather than scarfing them down like a race. Still, she refused to touch her eggs. Christine wasn't too bothered. She simply ate her meal and dropped her dish in the sink. She moved the drinks back to the fridge, locked up the liquor cabinet, then turned back to her guest.

"You can just put your plate over here when you're done," she said, patting the countertop. "TV's in the living room, snacks are in this cupboard over here. I'm gonna go take a shower, so…just make yourself at home, I guess."

She smiled, and walked down the hallway to her bedroom.

Normally, she wouldn't have considered leaving a strange child alone in her house. But Christine was still wearing her tee and overalls from the night before. She might have brushed her teeth, but her sickness was still clinging to her like a fine film. And now that the shock of her neighbor's kid harboring some kind of fugitive had worn off, her nausea was starting to make a reappearance.

She grabbed a change of clothes—just some sweats and a T-shirt— and headed for the bathroom. But she stopped short, letting out a small yelp.

Eleven was standing in the doorway, watching her blankly.

"Uh, hey. Is something wrong?"

She wasn't exactly surprised by Eleven's silence, but the lack of response was becoming frustrating. It was like talking to a very timid

brick wall.

Christine sighed, stepping around the girl and starting down the hall. She could hear Eleven shuffling behind her. She stopped just outside the bathroom. Eleven stopped too.

"Look. I can set you up with a movie or something if you want, but taking a shower is something people usually do alone."

"Alone. Bad."

Christine turned around in surprise.

Eleven had her hands clenched in front of her, her shoulders hunched over to make her seem as small as possible. Upon closer inspection, her expression wasn't blank so much as it was earnest. She was nervous, terrified of whatever it was she thought was waiting for her beyond the walls. When Christine thought about it, the girl probably hadn't been alone since Mike took her in. The last time she had been, she'd been out in the woods, running away from…something.

Christine withered. "Okay. Come on."

Eleven followed her into the bathroom, taking a seat on the toilet when Christine patted the lid. Christine put her fresh clothes up next to the sink, and then stepped into the bathtub. She turned to face Eleven, pulling the shower curtain closed.

"So I'm gonna turn the water on, and I'll be right behind this, okay? It's only going to be for a few minutes. And if you need anything, I'll be right here. Is that better?"

She peeked out from behind the curtain, and Eleven nodded.

It wasn't nearly ask awkward as she'd expected. Christine simply dropped her clothes on the other side of the curtain and carried on as usual. It felt good to wash her hair, scrub the drowsiness off her skin —even if the hot water wasn't doing much for her head.

Eleven was so quiet, it was easy to forget she was there. There was only one time Christine remembered she had an audience.

She was combing her conditioner through her hair, humming to herself as she went. It wasn't something she was conscious of. She was always humming something or other. But then she stopped—and the sound did not.

Christine paused, her eyes fluttering open. But the noise was gone. She started again, a bit softer this time. After a few seconds, it started again. She had to strain to hear it, but there was a faint, timid echo on the other side of the curtain. The notes were not the same, and the tune was almost clumsy, but it was definitely there. An experimental hum, testing out a song.

She grinned, and hummed a little louder.

Twenty minutes later, Christine stepped out of the shower, wrapped in a towel. A small giggle caught her off guard, and her head snapped toward Eleven. Impossibly, the girl was hiding a smile.

"What?" Christine asked.

She followed Eleven's eyes, reaching up to pat the towel that was twisted on top of her head. Just that seemed to be amusing, and Eleven pressed her thin lips into a tight line.

"Oh, you think I look funny, huh? Well…you look funny."

Christine stuck her tongue out, which did not seem to register as an appropriate response. Eleven stared at her, brow furrowed, and she sighed.

"Never mind. Sorry. It just means that you're being silly."

Eleven blinked. Uncertainly, she opened her mouth, letting her tongue hang out limply. It looked more like she was waiting for the doctor to stick her with a tongue depressor than making fun of someone—but the intent was clearly there.

Christine grinned. "Yeah, I guess I am. Fair enough."

They left the bathroom, Eleven following more closely this time than she had before. Christine figured that was probably a good sign. She was getting comfortable. Still, it made it a bit awkward when she had

to stop in front of her room, towel still wrapped tightly around her body and clothes in hand.

"Hey, could you just wait here for a second?" she asked, looking down at her. "I just need to—not *alone* just uh…privacy?"

To her surprise, Eleven's eyes lit up in understanding. She took a step away, and turned her back to the room.

Relieved, Christine changed into her fresh clothes. She called out when it was safe to reenter the room, toweling off her hair.

Eleven walked cautiously into the bedroom, her eyes wide and bright once more. Her curiosity was fascinating to Christine. She didn't think her room was anything special. It certainly wasn't as nice or pretty as Nancy's was anyway, with its pastel stripes and delicate furniture. Christine's walls were just beige, her carpet just green. Her closet doors were slotted wood, just like her bedframe, just like her desk, just like her dresser. None of the wood really matched.

Her desk was covered in books and paper. Homework, old receipts, the remnants of Will's missing posters. She'd plastered more paper over her walls, mostly movie posters she'd stolen since she started working at The Hawk. She had *Indiana Jones, Poltergeist, Empire Strikes Back,* and a few others. And just over her desk was her corkboard, where everything from pictures to science fair ribbons to ticket stubs was tacked up in disarray.

Eleven moved around the room, inspecting each thing in turn. She looked through all the necklaces and scrunchies strewn across the top of the dresser. She studied the phone on the bedside table, tugging on the cord and jumping a bit when it bounced back. She ran her hand over the unmade bed, feeling the texture of the blankets.

Christine draped her towel over the bedpost, and watched as Eleven stopped in front of the desk. She stared up at the board, silent for several minutes. Slowly, she raised a hand, and jabbed a finger at one of the photos.

"What's up?" Christine peered over her head. "Oh yeah, that's Dustin. That was a few summers ago. We went to the carnival."

It was a good picture of them. Christine and Dustin sat at a picnic table, pigging out on a bag of cotton candy. Mr. Henderson had been visiting for the weekend, and insisted on going as a family. Dustin had dragged his feet, knowing his parents would be arguing the whole night. So Claudia had invited Christine and her dad to join them. She'd been sick all night from the sugar, but it had been worth it to see Dustin so off-the-walls happy. And to listen to him scream in terror when she dragged him on the Rok N' Rol. He still hadn't forgiven her for that.

"Friend?" asked Eleven.

"Yeah, totally. Though sometimes he feels more like my annoying little brother." Eleven turned to look at her, and Christine backpedaled. "Um…you know, brother? Sister? Sibling? Someone who has the same parents as you. Your family."

Eleven's gaze dropped to the floor before she turned back to the board.

Christine watched her carefully, not at all sure of her next question. "Do you have any? Family?"

"Papa."

The word didn't seem to offer her any comfort. Eleven said it with more respect than fondness.

"Me too," said Christine. "I mean, it's just me and my dad. He's at work most of the time, but it's not so bad now that we're not moving every few months. He's a consultant. So we used to travel around helping different companies. It was fun for a while, but…well. It's not easy making friends when you only stick around for a couple months.

"Now he's the head of some HR department in the city. I get to stay in one school, and he still gets to travel a couple times a year for business trips. See? This is him."

She pulled another photo off of the board, handing it to Eleven so she could take a closer look. This was an old picture, six or seven years at least. They'd been living in California, and close enough to the coast

that she could go to the beach whenever she wanted. In the photo she was perched on top of her father's shoulders. Her hair was stringy from the salt water, and she had to squint in the bright afternoon sun. Both of them had pink cheeks, the start of a sunburn that would ache for days, but they were still beaming.

Eleven ran her fingers over the younger Christine's face, her own lips pulling into a smile.

"Happy."

Christine's stomach flopped. It was the way she'd said the word—as if it were more of a myth than an emotion. And as Christine looked at her—the thin frame, the sheared hair, the bags underneath her eyes, and still that small smile—she wondered if Mike was so crazy for wanting to protect her after all.

"Alright." She sighed, taking the picture from Eleven's hands and tacking it up on the board. "You leave me with no choice. You can have *one* more waffle, but that is it. After that, you're going to sit on the couch and mindlessly watch TV like a normal child, and I'm going to do my homework. I'm gonna be so behind from skipping today, it's ridiculous."

She herded Eleven out of the room, taking the chance to brush her fingers along the girl's back. Still, her smile never faltered. Christine marked that down as a win.

They sat down for second breakfast. Eleven had two more Eggos, while Christine finished the eggs that had gone untouched. Then they moved into the living room. Christine set Eleven up on the couch in front of the television, complete with popcorn and a blanket. She was riveted by the remote control, which took several minutes to explain to her.

Once she'd gotten a handle on which buttons changed the picture and which ones changed the sound, Christine let her be. She dragged her dinner table over to the armchair and began pulling out her homework. She'd been so sulky the day before that she hadn't done any of her assignments, and she would be missing a bunch in class. She figured she would just tell everyone she was sick. It wasn't

exactly a lie, she thought as her stomach writhed again.

The television did a pretty good job of keeping Eleven occupied—but only for a few hours. Soon her eyes began to stray from the screen, taking note of everything else in the room. She wouldn't get up from her seat, but Christine caught her eyeing the stereo cabinet with increasing interest.

"You can look, you know." Her voice made Eleven's head whip around, and Christine offered an encouraging smile. "El, you don't have to stay on the couch. So long as you don't pull any of my tapes apart, we'll be okay."

Eleven slowly got up from her seat. Her eyes stayed glued to Christine, as if she were worried she might change her mind at any moment. But Christine just nodded.

Eventually, Eleven eased into a meticulous circle of the room, just like she had in the bedroom. She pressed a few buttons on the stereo experimentally. However, the system wasn't on, so this had limited effect. Still, Eleven seemed happy just pushing them, and looking through the large collection of cassettes. She held them up to the light, studying them, winding the delicate wheels. But she never pulled on the tape, thank God.

When she tired of the stereo, she moved onto the rest of the room—the few magazines scattered on the table, the VHS tapes under the television, the knick-knacks and framed pictures on side tables. And though Christine kept a weather eye on her, most of Eleven's exploring seemed completely benign.

They sat this way for the rest of the day, only breaking for the bathroom or the occasional snack. Christine made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches for lunch, which she hadn't really expected Eleven to eat. To her surprise, the girl devoured it, keeping her pace just slow enough to avoid being alarming.

A little after two o'clock, the phone rang in the kitchen. The sound was jarring in the quiet afternoon, and Eleven jumped about a foot from her seat on the floor.

"It's alright," Christine said quickly, holding up her hands. "It's just the phone. I'm gonna go answer it, alright?"

Eleven nodded, still looking shaken, but leaning against the couch once more.

Christine grabbed the television remote, lowering the volume before she rushed to the phone. She was more focused on stopping the noise than anything else, and peeked around the corner into the living room as she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

"Chrissy? Hey, it's Nancy."

Her attention shot to the phone. That had not at all been what she was expecting.

"Oh, uh…hey, Nance. What's up?"

"Nothing, I just—Well, you didn't come to school, so…I was worried."

"Yeah. Guess I wasn't really feeling it."

"Right." There was a heavy pause, and Nancy cleared her throat. *"Is Barb there with you?"*

"No? I thought she was with you?"

"No. She didn't show up for school either. I just thought…"

There was something about Nancy's voice that kept Christine from immediately snapping at her. It was weak, wavering. It almost sounded like she was on the verge of tears.

"You haven't talked to her?" Nancy asked, almost pleading. *"Since last night?"*

"No, I told you. I called her house this morning, and her mom said she stayed with you. I figured since I hadn't seen her, that was probably the best bet."

"Are you sure?"

Christine clenched her jaw, tightening her grip on the handset.

"Look, Nancy. I woke up this morning, and everyone was just gone, and I was alone on Steve Harrington's couch. So yes. I'm pretty sure I didn't see her. Maybe she went to the hospital, considering her hand was sliced open like a ham."

That did not earn an immediate response. Christine pursed her lips in satisfaction.

A sound caught her attention from the other room, and she peered around the corner again to check on Eleven. She was still sitting on the floor, staring at the television, but the screen was now full of static. Christine furrowed her brow, but before she could think of an explanation, the picture came back. A cartoon rolled on the screen. It clicked. Now the news was playing. Click. Now an infomercial. Click. A soda commercial.

Christine looked down at the remote in her hand, and then to Eleven, still sitting six feet away from the screen.

"Christine, about last night…"

"Hey, Nancy, I'm actually in the middle of something right now. I'll call you if I hear from Barb, okay?"

She hung up the phone, staring into the living room. The television was still flickering, pausing on certain channels before deciding to scroll on. Eleven was staring at the screen unfazed, not looking the least bit bothered by the interference.

Christine took a few cautious steps into the room, not wanting to alarm her.

"Eleven?"

The television immediately turned off. Eleven whirled around, staring at Christine with wide eyes. Christine had never seen an expression worthier of the description "deer in the headlights." And in that instant, she decided not to acknowledge it.

"Sorry about the TV." Christine paced around the couch, placing the remote on top of the television. She smacked it weakly. "It's been a little out of whack this week. All the electric has. Do you want me to try and put it back on?"

Eleven quickly shook her head. It was then that Christine noticed the blood dripping from her nose.

"Oh, you're…hang on."

Christine hurried back to the kitchen. She grabbed a few paper towels, hurriedly running them under the sink and darting back into the living room. She forced herself to slow down as she kneeled down next to Eleven, not wanting to frighten her further.

"Can I…?"

She gestured to Eleven's face with the cloth. She half expected the girl to say no, but Eleven nodded instead. Christine placed a gentle hand on her chin. Lightly as she could, she nudged her face toward her, wiping the blood from her upper lip.

There were a thousand questions she wanted to ask. Are you alright? Does this happen often? Is it because of the weather or do you actually have telekinetic superpowers like the weird boys I babysit are insisting? She didn't ask any of them.

"There we go," she said, tossing the paper towel into the trash. "Much better."

Eleven was still staring at her. From what she could see, the terror was gone from her eyes. She'd gone back to the lingering, probing gaze, the one that made Christine feel as though she was being slowly analyzed from the inside out. It was so intense that Christine had to turn away. Still, she could feel the look burning her skin.

"So, uh…do you want anything to drink?"

"No."

"Okay. Do you want to lie down? Sleep for a bit?"

"No."

Christine bobbed her head. "Alright. Well, if the TV's out, we can always listen to some music."

She got to her feet, heading for the stereo and flicking it to life. She sifted through the cassettes, trying to find something particularly special. Her eyes lit up as she selected one, and slotted it into the machine.

"Okay, this one is my absolute favorite. Every single song on here is golden. I really need to get another copy soon, or I'm gonna wear the tape out."

She turned the volume down before the tape could start, ensuring that it couldn't startle Eleven. Then she slowly turned it up as the plucking bass to "Movin' Out" by Billy Joel swelled through the living room.

Christine bopped slowly to the beat, letting her chin fall forward as she rocked her head back and forth. She swayed on the spot, and closed her eyes to sing the along to the hums and riffs at the opening. Spinning around in circles, she peeked over at the couch to find Eleven watching her in undisguised puzzlement.

"What?" Christine giggled, bouncing on the spot. "You don't listen to music?"

Eleven shook her head, eyeing Christine with something between amusement and concern.

"Okaaay. What about dancing?"

She spun on the spot, throwing her arms up and tossing her head back dramatically. That got her a tiny giggle, and Eleven shook her head again.

"Wow. Well I love music. And I love to dance. And if no one's around, sometimes I even sing—*and it seems such a waste of time! If that's what it's all about! Momma if that's moving up than ahhh…'m movin' out!"*

Christine sank passionately to her knees, miming the horns in the

song and making Eleven giggle again. She grinned, only for Eleven to stick out her tongue again. Christine's jaw dropped comically and she laughed, rolling onto her butt and pushing the hair out of her face.

"Alright, fair enough. Enough silliness. Do you want me to turn it off?"

Eleven thought about it. She tugged her legs closer to her body, and shook her head. Christine didn't want to admit it, but it made her heart swell with pride.

"You've got good taste, kid. I'll give you that."

She turned the stereo down just a bit, and returned to the homework in her armchair. She was all the more reluctant now to focus on history dates and the plights of Rosasharn in in the West, but she did her best. Still, every few seconds she would look up to check on El.

Ever so slowly, the girl had migrated to sit next to the stereo. She seemed entranced by the spinning wheels of the cassette player, and stared at them through entire songs. She jumped at the sound the tape made when it stopped, and Christine talked her through what buttons to press to eject the tape and flip it. When side B started, she went right back to staring at the wheels and humming along under her breath.

But there was more than music weighing on Christine's mind. She sat back in her armchair, watching the small girl bouncing happily in the corner. She was at peace now, but when the television had turned off, she'd seemed properly scared. And not of the television set, but of Christine's reaction.

Christine shut down the trail of thinking before she could even get started. The electricity had been acting up all week. That hadn't been a lie. Faulty power lines and signal interference were much more plausible than…what? Superpowers?

At the same time, she couldn't deny that El seemed to have… something. Certainly something that made her valuable to the people who were looking for her. Whether that was information or abilities or property, Christine couldn't be sure.

And if that was true, how much of the rest was? They boys seemed willing to bet a lot on Eleven—that she had powers, that she knew where Will was, that she could find him. And here was Christine, sitting in front of her unfinished English assignment.

She glanced over at Eleven again, now swaying to the tune of "She's Always A Woman." Christine wasn't sure how her day had gone from waking up at a boy's house to babysitting an ability-enhanced fugitive. But she was pretty sure it was not about to start making sense any time soon.

10. Down to the Quarry

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains more than average angst and grief, as well as character death as displayed in *Stranger Things* 1.03. Please proceed with caution.

At ten after three, Christine and Eleven headed out into the backyard. Christine walked her bike around from the front of the house, and returned to find Eleven pacing the tree line. She stared down at the watch that Mike had given her, chanting under her breath.

"Three-one-five. Three-one-five. Three-one-five."

"El, it's okay," Christine assured her, taking a seat on the stoop. "School lets out at three-zero-five, so it's gonna take a few minutes to get here. They'll come."

Eleven nodded, and ceased her chanting. Still, she continued to pace.

As Christine had predicted, the boys were a few minutes late. She wasn't surprised to find Mike at the head of the group, pedaling so fast his feet were in danger of slipping off. He might have run Eleven over if he'd been going any faster.

"El! You're okay!"

"Yes, she's fine," said Christine. "We sat inside all day, listened to music, and she's still in one piece. As promised."

Mike did not acknowledge Christine, or her smirk. She suspected it had something to do with the relieved smile Eleven was now sporting since he'd pulled up.

"God, Mike would ya wait up?" Dustin panted as he and Lucas careened into the backyard. "I'm gonna have a heart attack. Hey, Chrissy. Hey, Eleven."

"Can we just do this?" asked Lucas. "We're losing light, people!"

"Alright, geez." Mike waved a hand, gesturing for the other boys to

get a head start. Then he patted the seat of his bike, turning back to Eleven. "Come on. We only have a few hours."

Eleven climbed onto the bike with trepidation. Her legs dangled aimlessly on either side, and she had to cling to Mike as he pushed off of the grass. They teetered, and then shot off after Dustin and Lucas.

Christine climbed on her own bike, already shaking her head. She had a bad feeling about this.

The boys led the way down the streets. They seemed to know where they were going, which was more than Christine could say. The houses began to thin out, giving way to bushes and trees. They must have been traveling toward the town border.

They coasted to a stop on the side of the road, along a dark patch of forest. The crime scene tape hanging between the trees did nothing to help her nerves.

"Okay," said Mike. "So this is where they found Will's bike."

"What was Will doing all the way out here?" asked Christine.

"He lives around here," said Dustin. "He always takes Mirkwood home."

"Mirkwood?"

"Yeah, it's from *Lord of the Rings*," Lucas explained.

"Lucas, it's from *The Hobbit.* How many times do I have to tell you? It's *The Hobbit!"*

"How many times do I have to tell *you* that it doesn't matter?"

"Enough," Christine groaned. "Why do we call it Mirkwood?"

"Because," Dustin said brightly, "if there's any place in Hawkins that looks like it's plagued with dark magic and giant spiders, this is it."

She turned to look at the tree line—twisted trunks and shadows and

darkness.

"Okay. I officially hate this."

"Then don't come," snapped Mike. He helped Eleven off the back of his bike, and turned to face them all defiantly. "You may be scared, but we're not. We're going in there, and we're going to find Will."

He turned on his heel, marching into the woods. It would have made a grand exit, if he didn't have to pick his way through brambles and steer his bike around roots and twigs. Eleven followed him dutifully.

"Don't worry, Chrissy," said Lucas, wheeling his bike past her. "We got this."

"Yeah," added Dustin. He patted her on the arm. "We've got your back."

They filed into the forest, following the path that Mike was forging, and leaving Christine to deliberate on the side of the road. But as much as she disliked the idea of wandering in the woods, she disliked the idea of the kids wandering alone more. So she kept her grumbling to herself, and forced her bike into the dying foliage.

It was not an easy trek. Early November meant the ground was already covered by a blanket of dead leaves a few inches thick. Their sneakers slipped and sank between them, right down into the mud. The rain from the past few days only made it worse. As if it wasn't bad enough, they weren't exactly on even ground. There was no path in sight. Rocks and wandering tree roots blocked their way, and more than once, their bikes got tangled in twigs and ivy. Each time, Christine forced everyone to stop so she could unstick the wheels. Mike was vocally unhappy about this delay, but Christine was adamant. If they thought they'd be allowed to flounce out of her sight while they were wandering illegally through a crime scene, they had more than one other thing coming.

It felt like miles before they stopped.

"Alright," said Mike, looking around the clearing. "I think this is where we found Eleven."

"Is it?" asked Dustin.

"Yeah. I think I recognize that tree."

Lucas rolled his eyes. "Dude, they all look the same. They're trees."

"Shut up, Lucas. There's more space here. The trees are farther apart. Right, Dustin?"

"I don't know, man. It was pretty dark that night. And it was raining."

"Exactly. Besides, what does it matter where we found her?"

"Because! This is where she saw Will!"

"Nuh-uh. She never said she saw Will."

"She knows where he is. It's the same thing."

"That's not the same thing."

"How is that *not* the same thing?"

"If she knew where he was, she could have just taken us straight to him! We wouldn't have to hike all the way out here first!"

They continued to bicker, Dustin stepping in every now and then to mediate. Christine simply waited, hands on her hips. They had a long way to go, and playing referee would just be a waste of her precious energy.

She scanned the surrounding trees. Mike was right; there was more space between them now. But it didn't make the forest seem any less foreboding. It felt like the shadows were closing in on all sides, a solid wall encroaching with the setting sun. A prickly feeling was rising on the back of her neck. As she looked around, she realized she wasn't the only one.

Eleven had stepped away from Mike. She was staring at the trees too, her hands in fists at her sides. The look of terror was back, the deer in the headlights.

Christine crossed over to her, ready to ask what was wrong. Before she could, she heard it.

"Guys, stop," she ordered, and again when Mike tried to argue. "I'm serious. Stop."

By some miracle, they relented. Even Mike's pissy expression faded in the silence that followed. Together they listened, scrutinizing the trees.

A twig snapped.

Eleven seized Christine's hand, and the boys collectively gasped. Lucas slid off his backpack, the zipper loud as a chainsaw.

"Stop!" Christine hissed, waving him off. "Lucas, stop moving!"

"I need my wrist rocket! What if it's the Demogorgon?"

"Oh shit," Dustin whispered. "We are so screwed if it's the Demogorgon."

"Whatever it is, we are not taking any chances," said Christine. She squeezed Eleven's hand, trying to look down at her without taking her eyes off the trees. "Do you know where we need to go?"

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Eleven nod.

"Alright, go. Quietly. Boys, go."

Christine stared down the darkness, listening to the kids shuffle behind her. She waited until they were a safe distance away before she moved, slowly backing up to her bike. The sound was gone, but the prickle on her neck was not. She knew she was being ridiculous. But with all the talk of monsters and superpowers, she had a right to be on edge.

She followed the kids out of the clearing, and onto a path they'd found on the other side of the trees. That was a relief. Not only was it easier to walk, but it was easier to keep an eye on everyone. The noise in the trees might have been nothing, but she wasn't planning on letting any of the kids out of her sight—especially Eleven.

Christine stayed in the very middle of the party as the sun began to set. She counted her charges compulsively—Dustin and Lucas in the back, Mike and Eleven up front. They'd been talking in low voices for miles. It was mostly Mike, but Eleven seemed to be getting the hand of conversation, her words getting longer and steadier. Not that Christine was eavesdropping. It was just easy to hear them when no one was speaking in a good five-mile radius.

She noticed that Mike was sporting a new cut on his chin. She wished she could say it was a mystery. Dustin often came home with scrapes and bruises he wouldn't explain. That was different from the ones he *couldn't* explain. She knew boys played rough, but she also knew that most of the party had a tough time at school. They were too proud or scared to talk about it, though, so she wasn't sure what she could do. It was frustrating, to say the least.

She watched as Eleven pointed to the wound, and Mike brushed her off. Whatever she said next surprised him, and made him smile all too happily.

Christine didn't realize how closely she'd been following them until her bike collided with Mike's.

"Hey!" He squawked in protest, grappling with his handlebars as they veered off course. "Watch it!"

"Sorry! Sorry, I didn't…I'll just…"

Reluctantly, she fell back. Mike rolled his eyes at her, and Eleven giggled next to him. It made his irritation vanish.

Christine tried to keep her pace slow after that, putting some distance between them. She didn't like that she couldn't hear their conversation anymore. She couldn't even see Eleven's face.

Dustin and Lucas appeared on either side of her.

"You okay, Chrissy?" asked Lucas on her right.

"Yeah, I'm good. Thanks, Lucas."

"You sure? You look kinda…iffy."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"N-Nothing! I mean, nothing bad. I just thought you seemed, you know—that you might be kinda, um…"

Dustin sniggered on her left. "He means you're making your giraffe face."

Christine gaped. *"Excuse me?"*

"Your giraffe face. You know?"

He puckered his lips, looking more like a sea bass than a giraffe. His eyes bulged, and he craned his neck up as far as it would go, peering down his nose at Mike and Eleven in front of them.

"I do not look like that."

"Nah, it's more like this," laughed Lucas. He stretched his neck and squinted. His giraffe had more eyebrow wiggling, but less lips. "It's what you look like whenever you drop Dustin off for school."

"I do not!"

"Not always. Just when you're worried. Which is a lot."

She frowned. She didn't think she worried a lot. Sure, she worried about Dustin sometimes. He had a hard time with bullies at school, and she was sure things were only worse with Will missing. And now she had to watch out for monsters and kidnappers and whatever else was creeping around Hawkins.

So she wanted to make sure Dustin got to school okay. That didn't make her a giraffe.

"Hey, it's okay," said Dustin, with another pat on her arm. "It's cute that you worry about me."

"I'll give you something to worry about," she grumbled, but she wasn't sure that he'd heard her.

"We just noticed you seem pretty protective of Eleven now."

"Of course I am? She's like, twelve with no hair, no clothes, no basic vocabulary. And apparently she's got a bunch of people after her trying to hunt her down like an animal."

"Supervillains," Dustin blurted.

Lucas groaned. "Dude, they're not supervillains."

"Fine. Mad scientists. I bet she's some kind of test subject. That's why she has that tattoo."

"Hold up, *tattoo?"* Both boys shushed her, and Christine lowered her voice. "What tattoo?"

"It's on her wrist," Lucas explained. "Zero-one-one. That's why Mike calls her Eleven."

"God. Who would do something like that?"

"I'm telling you, she's a science experiment! Like Wolverine! That's probably how she got her powers in the first place!"

"Makes sense," Christine sighed.

Her gaze drifted back to Eleven—the shaved head, the skinny arms, the delicate, hunched shoulders. She was calm now, even smiling as she talked to Mike. But Christine couldn't forget the way fear looked in her eyes, or her hollow voice when asked about her family. Had her real family been taken from her? Had she been abducted? Or worse, what if she hadn't been? What kind of father would do something like this to his kid?

It was a few seconds before Christine noticed the boys were staring at her.

"What?"

"You agreed with him," said Lucas.

"What? No, I didn't."

"Uh, yeah you did," said Dustin. "I said she had powers, and you said

'makes sense.'"

"Dustin, I'm humoring you. None of this makes sense."

But he did not seem to believe her excuse. His surprise morphed into a shit-eating grin. "You saw them, didn't you?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, come on! You saw her powers, right? You saw her move stuff with her mind?"

"I definitely did not," Christine said resolutely. "She's a fugitive, not Jean Gray."

"Nice one."

"Thanks."

"But I know you saw *something."*

Christine kept her eyes straight ahead, trying to ignore Dustin's curls as he bounced along in her peripheral vision. He would not go away.

"I…I don't know what I saw."

"I KNEW IT!"

Christine and Lucas shushed him, which made Dustin duck down for some reason. After nearly tripping himself off the path, he turned to Christine with rapt excitement.

"So? What did she do?"

"She didn't *do* anything, okay?"

"But what did you see?" asked Lucas.

"Nothing! Look, my—my TV was just having issues. All the electronics have been weird this week. The brown out, remember?"

She'd intended this statement to raze their excitement, but Dustin and Lucas turned to each other with intent looks.

"Do you think she can control radio waves?" asked Dustin.

"No way," said Lucas. "And anyway, how would that help her close a door?"

"It wouldn't! Which means she has *more than one* superpower! How sick is that?!"

"They're not superpowers! She's just weird!"

"In more than one way! Damn. She's like a real life Scarlet Witch!"

"Scarlet Witch doesn't have telekinesis, dummy."

"Hey, Wanda can move things! And we don't know how Eleven's doing it, so it *could* be chaos magic! Or it could be the Force!"

"Nobody's using the Force," Christine insisted before they could get into another argument. "Look, I don't know how much of your story I believe. This whole superpower, special sense, monster thing—it's crazy. But I do think that something weird is going on. Now if Eleven can help us find Will, great. But right now I'm just trying to make sure she stays safe. That all of you do. Got it?"

The boys nodded solemnly. Then Dustin leaned forward to smirk at Lucas.

"Told ya she'd believe me."

Christine slapped his hat off into the brush.

Dustin scrambled, but was unable to recover it. He cursed as he smacked down his kickstand, going to look in the bushes while Lucas and Christine cackled behind him.

She turned to Lucas as his laughter died away. "Hey. Are *you* okay?"

"Yeah, I guess." He stared ahead, his jaw taut. "I don't care about any of this mad scientist stuff either. I just wanna find Will. That's the most important thing to me."

"I know, bud."

"We…We are gonna find him, right?"

Christine wished she'd never seen Lucas so hopeless. He'd put his faith in Mike and Eleven, followed them out into the woods on their word so they could find their friend. But there was no confidence. And Christine didn't want to lie.

"I hope so," she said, with a supportive smile. "And if we don't find him today, maybe we'll find him tomorrow. Will's always seemed quiet, but he's smart. And he's got some pretty cool friends looking for him. He's got that in his favor."

Lucas gave her a half-hearted smile, but did not respond. Dustin was already catching up to them, still cursing under his breath.

"I know!" he said as he leveled with them. "I know, watch my language. Sorry, Christine."

"Hey, I'm not your mother," she said with a shrug. "We're in the middle of the woods with a potentially psychic runaway, looking for your friend who's being hunted by a Dungeons and Dragons monster. You can curse all you want."

"Shit," he said experimentally. Then, when she didn't stop him, "God damn it. Son of a bitch. Motherf—…"

"Alright, that's enough of that."

The forest was getting darker. Shadows around them subsided into blackness, making it difficult to see. The boys flicked on the headlights on their bikes, but it didn't help much. Despite Christine's reservations, the group spread out naturally. Eleven was forging ahead, faster now that she felt they were getting close. Mike stayed by her side, but they were well ahead of everyone else. Dustin was losing stamina fast, and Christine and Lucas hung back to ensure that he wasn't left behind. Lucas didn't have the energy to give him shit for slowing down. Christine couldn't blame them. Even her feet were starting to hurt.

Finally, the trees started to thin out. The canopy of branches overhead gave way to navy blue sky. Brambles turned into tall grass,

which eventually bled into a flat lawn where the path ended. And up ahead, Mike and Eleven finally stopped.

"Oh thank God," Dustin panted. "I think I'm gonna die."

"Just hurry up, man," complained Lucas.

They hurried ahead, and Christine brought up the rear. They were definitely on someone's lawn. A gravel driveway stretched between a lonely length of road and a single story house on their left. None of the lights were on, but it was clearly lived in. There were boxes out on the porch, and sheets hanging in the yard to dry. Christine wasn't sure where the trail had spat them out, but everyone else seemed to know where they were.

Dustin and Lucas dropped their bikes dejectedly.

"What are we doing here?" Lucas demanded.

"She said he's hiding here," said Mike.

"Um…no!"

"I swear," Dustin wheezed, "if we walked all the way out here for nothing…"

"That's exactly what we did!"

"Okay, hold on," Christine interjected. "Can somewhere tell me where we are?"

"That's Will's house," Lucas said angrily, jabbing a finger at the property. "You know, where he lives? Where he would be if he wasn't —oh, I don't know—*missing*?!"

Christine's heart sank. She looked up at the dark house, surprised to find herself a little bit heartbroken. Just for a couple hours, she'd managed to fall under the spell of the boys' story. But superpowers, government conspiracies, mad scientists…none of it was going to help find Will. That was a real problem. A very real lost boy who they had no way of finding.

Eleven was standing at the head of the group, her wide eyes looking crestfallen as Lucas began yelling.

"I told you she didn't know what the hell she was talking about!"

Mike rolled his eyes, but even he seemed disappointed. He turned to El, sounding very tired. "Why did you bring us here?"

"Mike," Lucas barked over El's stammering. "Don't waste your time with her."

"Hey," said Christine, holding up a hand. "Come on, Lucas…"

"What do you want to do then?" Mike demanded of him.

"Call the cops, like we should've done yesterday!"

"We are *not* calling the cops!"

"Hey, guys?"

"What other choice do we have?"

"I don't know!"

"Guys!"

Dustin was standing a few feet into the yard, staring out at the main road. It was empty at first. Then Christine saw the lights of two police cruisers and an ambulance speed by.

Christine's heart sank a little further.

"Will," Mike breathed into the night air.

Exhaustion forgotten, everyone ran back to their bikes. They were a scrambling mess of tripping and squeaking and false started pedaling. By the time they hit the street, Christine could have sworn the boys were moving just as fast as the cruisers. They flew across the pavement, following the sound of the sirens through the night. Then the sirens stopped. They followed the lights instead, close enough to hear the commotion of a crowd. And then they spat out into another

clearing.

It was a quarry. Christine couldn't help but look up in awe at the cliffs that stretched up over their heads. She'd never been to this part of town before. The rocky walls created a natural basin, a huge dark lake that bled out from the shore. Christine wondered if teens came here to swim at all, or if it always felt this dark and creepy.

"Pst!" Dustin was hissing at her from behind a fire engine. "Move it!"

She hurriedly wheeled her bike over, ducking behind the vehicle and peering around the side with the kids.

There were upwards of twenty people standing near the water. Policemen, state troopers, EMTs, firemen. They created a wall around the shore, blocking view of whatever they were staring at. But she could hear the water sloshing, her the worried whispers of all those bystanders. Only one thing in Hawkins had earned enough attention to cause this.

"It's not Will," Mike said, shaking his head. "It can't be."

A few policemen exchanged looks at the edge of the lake, then forlornly drifted away. It left a gap in the wall of first responders, a window to the water, where two rangers were pulling something out of the water.

If there was room in the human body for her heart to sink more, it did.

It was a corpse, laid out on a stretcher. Judging by the size, it was a child. And there was only one child in Hawkins that was unaccounted for.

"It's Will." Lucas's voice broke. "It's really Will."

"It's—It's not," said Dustin, shaking his head. "It's not, Chrissy. Right?"

He looked up with her, begging her to agree. But Dustin's eyes were already shining with tears.

Christine bit her lip, and tugged Dustin to her chest. She wrapped her

arms around his shoulders as they began to shake. He sobbed into her chest, his arms squeezing the life out of her waist. She knew there was nothing she could say. So she just patted his head, and tried to hold back her own tears for his sake.

Mike backed away from the crime scene, and Eleven trailed after him. Even she looked like she was on the verge of crying.

"Mike…" she said brokenly, reaching out for him.

But Mike smacked her hand away.

"Mike?" he repeated angrily. "Mike what? You were supposed to help us find him alive! You said he was alive!"

"Mike, stop," Christine scolded weakly.

"No!" He rounded on her, his voice shaky. "She lied to us! Why did you lie to us? What's—What's wrong with you? What is *wrong* with you?!"

Eleven shook her head. "Mike…"

"What?!" he snapped, and Eleven took a tiny step back.

Christine pulled away from Dustin. "Mike, stop. You're scaring her."

"Good! She should be scared! Will was!"

"Mike!"

But he was already moving. He ran back to his bike, wiping his face as he went. It took him a few tries to get the thing upright because his hands were shaking so badly.

"Mike, come on," Lucas said through tears. "Don't do this, man. Mike!"

"Mike, where are you going?" asked Dustin. "Mike!"

They called after him as he got a running start and took off into the darkness. Dustin made a move to run after him, but Christine managed to grab him by the sleeve.

"No, no. Let him go. He wants to be alone."

"But Will…"

"I know, Dust. I'll call his mom to make sure he got home okay. Right now…I think I should take you guys home."

It was a sign of how broken they were that no one argued with her.

Christine kneeled down in front of Eleven, who was still staring after Mike. She pried the girl's hands from her head, and held them as gently as she could.

"Hey, it's okay, El. It's okay. You were just trying to help."

"Mike," she sobbed again. "But Mike…"

"I know. But he's just really scared, okay? He's gonna come back. But right now he's scared and sad, and he just needs to be alone."

"Alone…is bad."

"Sometimes, yeah. But sometimes alone just lets you think. It lets you feel things without worrying about everyone else." Eleven still didn't look convinced, so Christine rubbed a hand along her arm. "Hey. You are not going to be alone. You can stay at my house tonight, and we can have more waffles tomorrow. You do not have to be alone."

Eleven blinked back her tears, looking up at Christine. "Promise?"

"Yes," Christine said immediately. "Promise. I promise."

She braved a smile and squeezed El's shoulder. She still looked shaken, but she nodded all the same.

"Dustin…?" Christine asked, but he was two steps ahead of her.

"Come on, El." He'd wiped his face, and already mounted his bike. His cheeks still shining with tears, he still mustered a smile. "My bike is way cooler than Christine's. You see these things on the wheels? You can stand on them, and then just hold onto my shoulders. It's kind of scary at first, but it's really cool."

He helped Eleven on his bike, and Christine patted Lucas on the arm. He barely responded, only managing a sniffle.

"Come on, Lucas. Let's get you home."

They took off together, Dustin and Lucas having to take the lead back into town. Christine rode between them, her eyes bouncing back and forth like a pinball machine. Dustin, Eleven, Lucas. Dustin, Eleven, and Lucas. They were all still there. Dustin, Eleven, and Lucas…

They stopped in front of the Sinclair house, where the lights were still on inside.

"Do you want me to go in with you?" Christine asked.

Lucas only shook his head. She nodded, not expecting much else. Still, she fumbled with her words. What was there to say?

"Okay. Just…be careful, alright? Get some sleep, and…we'll check in with you tomorrow."

Dustin and Lucas nodded to each other, words failing even them. And then Lucas walked up the driveway alone. They waited until he had parked his bike, until he'd gone through the door, until the shadows of his parents greeted him in the living room. Only then did Christine flip her kickstand up, and they headed back to their own houses.

"Are you gonna be okay?" Christine asked him as they pulled onto their own street.

Dustin just shrugged. There was no real answer to a question like that.

"You can stay at my place too, if you want."

"Are you kidding?" asked Dustin. "I'm not gonna be allowed to leave the house until…ever."

Christine smiled feebly at the joke. "Still. I can try and persuade your mom."

"Nah. I think I…I kinda just want…"

"It's okay, Dust. I know."

They rode into her backyard. Eleven climbed shakily off the back of Dustin's bike, and walked with Christine to the backdoor. Christine held it open for her, then hesitated.

"I need to walk Dustin home, okay?" she asked. "You can lock the door, and you can watch me from the window. I'm only gonna be like twenty feet away. And when I come back, I'll knock like this, so you know to let me in."

Christine knocked against the open door, two slow, and three quick. Eleven's eyes widened, ready to argue. But then she looked at Dustin. He was hovering behind Christine, his eyes sunk to the pavement, scuffing his shoe against the stoop. Slowly, Eleven nodded.

"Thank you," Christine said earnestly.

Eleven closed the door, peeking out through the back panel so she could see them. Christine gestured to the side of the house, showing Eleven which way to walk. Then she wrapped an arm around Dustin's shoulder and headed next door.

The Hendersons' front door wrenched open after a single knock.

"Dusty!" Mrs. Henderson exclaimed. "Where on earth have you been? I've been worried sick! I know you said you had AV club, but it's past dinner! It's nearly…Dusty?"

Dustin had not responded. He stepped forward, and hugged his mother tightly. Mrs. Henderson looked down in surprise, then looked up to Christine for answers. All Christine had to do was shake her head.

"Oh…oh no." Mrs. Henderson clapped a hand over her mouth. She sunk down to her knees, pulling Dustin fiercely to her chest. "Oh, baby, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, sweetheart."

Both of them began to cry. It took everything Christine had to make sure that she didn't start too. She had to keep it together. Just a little longer.

After several minutes, Mrs. Henderson ushered Dustin into the house. She attempted to do the same to Christine, who took a step back.

"I'm fine, Claudia…"

"No," Mrs. Henderson said fiercely. "No, no, no. I am not letting you stay in that house alone tonight. You can stay here."

"Really, Mrs. Henderson." Christine glanced over at her own house, where she could just make out the shape of Eleven in her father's bedroom window. "I think we all just need to be alone for a little while. To…To process…things..."

She wrapped her arms around her chest, making herself seem smaller until Mrs. Henderson sighed.

"What on earth happened, Christine?"

"We…We don't know. The boys had AV club, and after that they were still really down. So I said I'd take them on a bike ride around town, so long as we stuck together. They just wanted to *do something*, you know? And then we saw the cruisers and we followed them down to the quarry, and…"

She trailed off again, trying not to look at the way Mrs. Henderson covered her mouth.

"And did—did they find…?"

"Yeah. Looks like it."

Mrs. Henderson shuddered a gasp. "Oh, that poor boy. His family, and—and for you to see that!"

"I got them out of there as soon as I could," Christine promised. "We took Lucas all the way home first, and…and Mike took off on his own, so I have to go call his mom now. I just wanted to make sure that Dustin…was safe first, I guess."

"Thank you, Christine," Mrs. Henderson said breathlessly. "I cannot thank you enough. I…oh, come here, sweetheart."

She pulled Christine into a bone crushing hug. It felt nice to have her hair stroked, to have someone pat her back. Christine felt her own tears welling in her eyes, and had to pull away before they could break free.

"I'm—I'm gonna call the Wheelers," she managed, taking a few steps back. "But I'll come back in the morning. Just to be sure."

"Alright, dear. And if anything happens, anything at all! You don't hesitate to come over here! I don't care if it's three o'clock in the morning. You bang on this door until Dusty or I let you in."

"Thanks, Mrs. Henderson."

She turned away before the woman could call her back.

Back at her own house, Christine knocked carefully on the door. It opened a crack, Eleven's big brown eyes peering through before she opened it the rest of the way. Christine slipped inside, and locked every lock on the door. She leaned her back against it, and closed her eyes for a moment.

"Okay?"

Eleven was peering up at her in the dark, face full of concern. Christine used her dwindling energy to summon a smile.

"Yeah. I'm okay. How about we get some lights on, hm? Maybe some music."

Together they walked around the room, turning on the lamps and all the lights in the house. After such a long day in the woods, it was nice to have something to chase the shadows away. Back in the living room, Christine talked Eleven through turning on the stereo. She let her pick her own tape this time, ending up with some of her dad's James Taylor. As soon as she heard the gentle chords of "Fire and Rain," Christine felt the last of her energy drain away.

"Hey," she said softly to Eleven. "I'll be right back, okay? Bathroom. You know, privacy."

Eleven nodded solemnly, and turned back to the stereo.

Christine walked down the hall, shutting herself in the bathroom and leaning heavily on the door. It felt stupid to be so upset. She didn't even know Will all that well. She had to keep it together for Eleven. It felt stupid not to be upset. He was just a kid, and she'd just seen his damn body fished out of the lake…

She had to bite hard on her lip to keep her crying silent. She turned off the light again, and sunk down onto the floor.

11. Eleven

Christine did not know how long it took her to compose herself. There was no clock in the bathroom. But her legs were sore and her nose was stuffy. She dragged herself to her feet, splashing water on her face and pulling up her hair. She checked her dim reflection in the mirror, making sure she was presentable. Then she opened the door, and immediately took a step back.

Eleven was waiting in the hallway. She sat cross-legged opposite the door, and looked up shyly at her.

"Hey," Christine said, trying to seem casual. "Is everything okay?"

El nodded. Her eyes drifted over Christine, checking her from top to bottom. "Okay?"

"Yeah, I'm okay. I'm fine. I just needed to uh…"

"I understand."

Christine looked down at Eleven's earnest face. Impossibly, El smiled at her. It made it a little easier to pull herself together.

"Thanks, El. Come on. I'll get you a big T-shirt or something, and we can get some sleep."

"No," said Eleven firmly. She got up from her seat. "Mike."

"Right," Christine agreed. "Mike. Shit, you're right. Come on."

Eleven followed her to the kitchen, where Christine grabbed the phone from the wall. She dialed the number and leaned against the counter, saying a silent prayer under her breath. It took a few rings. So many she was afraid she'd get voicemail. But at the last moment, someone picked up.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. It's Christine Walcott."

"Oh, um…hi, Christine. It's not really a good time right now…"

"I know. That's actually why I'm calling. Did Mike make it home okay?"

"Michael? Oh—yes, he's…he's here."

"Oh, thank God." Christine nodded to Eleven, who similarly relaxed. "He ran off before I could stop him, and I had to take Lucas and Dustin home too…"

"You were with the boys?" Mrs. Wheeler asked. *"Christine, what happened? Where were you?"*

Christine relayed the same story she'd given Mrs. Henderson. The boys had been forlorn after AV club when Christine came to bike Dustin home. She'd agreed to take them on a joy ride of the neighborhood, only for them to run into the police cars and sirens. Before she could stop them, the boys were following the trail, and they'd ended up at the quarry with Will's body.

"How is he doing?" Christine asked as her tale came to an end.

"He's…" Mrs. Wheeler trailed off. Christine couldn't blame her. *"He'll be okay. He just needs time."*

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"Are you alright? Nancy said you didn't make it to school today. If you wanted to stay here, Christine, I wouldn't mind…"

"Oh, I'm fine, Mrs. Wheeler. I was just really sick this morning. But I've got Mrs. Henderson next door if I need anything. I have to check in with her in the morning, and I still have to call my dad."

"Alright. If you're sure…oh. Hold on, Christine. Nancy wants to talk to you."

A bolt of fear shot through Christine's chest, which made her feel very stupid considering her situation.

"Oh no! I've actually got to go, Mrs. Wheeler. My dad, he…"

"Christine?"

She deflated pressing a hand to her forehead. "Yeah, uh…hey, Nancy."

"What's going on? Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. I was just checking on Mike."

"Mike?" Nancy lowered her voice, whispering into the phone. *"You skipped school to hang out with my brother?"*

"No," Christine snapped. "I went biking with the boys after school, and we stumbled onto a crime scene. Mike ran off, and I wanted to make sure he was safe. Sue me."

Eleven was still standing next to her, looking very alarmed by her tone. Christine waved away her concern, slumping against the wall. On the other end of the line, Nancy had softened.

"Was it…Was it really Will?"

"Yeah," Christine sighed. "I mean, we didn't get close, but…it looks like it."

"Shit. I mean, it's already all over the news but…shit."

"Yeah. I know."

They sat in silence until Nancy sighed.

"Christine, have you heard from Barb? At all?"

"Uh, no." She glanced at the clock, frowning. "She seriously hasn't talked to you?"

"No. And she didn't come to school, and she didn't come home… Chris, I —I think something might've happened…"

Christine's heart stopped. She glanced down to Eleven, still looking up at her with wide, probing eyes. A thousand thoughts shot through her head, all of which she shut down. She was not getting caught up

in this again. Will had gotten lost and drowned. He hadn't been eaten by some monster, or taken out by secret government spies. It was an accident. There was nothing going on.

"No," Christine said, shaking her head. "Come on, I mean…this is Barb, right? Did you call the hospital?"

"I did," Nancy insisted. *"And I called her parents, and her parents called the cops…"*

"The cops? But…Nancy, I'm sure she's…"

"Gone. She's…She's just gone, Christine."

Christine's mind was reeling. Not two days ago Mike had been telling her the same thing about Will. And now Will was…

"Did they really call the cops?" she asked feebly.

"Yeah. I gave a statement and everything. They're gonna send deputies to school tomorrow to talk to everyone."

Christine cursed under her breath. This was bad. This was unimaginable. It was the last thing she needed right now.

"Look," Nancy said. *"I know things have been really shitty. But I need you to come to school tomorrow. You're the last person that saw her al… You're the last person that saw her."*

Her misstep sent a shiver down Christine's spine. She leaned her head against the wall.

"Yeah, no. I'll be there."

"Thanks." Nancy took a shuddering breath, and lowered her voice again. *"You're sure you don't remember anything? From the party? Did she say something to you? Anything about where she was going?"*

"No, nothing. After you…um…I was just really drunk, you know? So Barb set me up on the couch and I passed out."

"That's it? You just…went to sleep, and left her alone?"

Her tone was enough. The unsettling sorrow in Christine's chest found a comfortable alternative by turning into anger. Her hand tightened on the handset.

"I didn't just *go to sleep*. I passed out because I was upset and I was drunk."

"Yeah, Christine. I was there. I know how drunk you were."

"What, so it's my fault now?"

"No. That's not what I said."

"No, it's just what you meant. You wanna talk about leaving people alone? How about the part where you went upstairs to *change clothes* and told Barb and me to get lost?"

"This is not my fault," she hissed. *"I told you guys to go home. It's not my fault you decided to have a breakdown on the couch. If you'd left together, none of this would have happened!"*

"A breakdown," Christine echoed derisively. "Exactly. I had a completely spontaneous breakdown out of nowhere, which had absolutely nothing to do with you. And that makes it my fault. Well if it's my fault, why didn't you look for Barb in the morning, Nance? Cause I woke up in Steve Harrington's house alone. Which means you woke up before that, saw me, and left me there. Where was Barb then, huh? Did you look? Or were you just too excited about your first walk of shame?"

"Shut up, Christine."

"No, Nancy, you shut up. I will come to school and talk to the cops tomorrow. But I am not gonna talk to you."

She slammed the phone onto the hook so hard she swore the plastic nearly cracked. It made a loud ding, which startled Eleven at her side. Christine immediately felt awful. She'd been so wrapped up she forgot the girl was there.

"Sorry," she sighed. "I'm sorry, El."

"Not okay?"

Christine laughed dryly. "Yeah. Not okay. But you don't have to worry about it. That's not your problem."

She herded Eleven down the hall, grabbing her suitable pajamas from the bedroom. El changed into cotton shorts and an oversized Elton John T-shirt, while Christine dragged the couch cushions into her bedroom.

It had been a while since she'd built a blanket fort. Thankfully, the basics were hard to forget. She stacked the cushions in the corner, wedging them between the end of her desk and her dresser. She used pushpins to secure the sheets into the wall, not caring about the holes it left in the fabric. Then she laid out some spare blankets and an assortment of pillows. By the end, she had a nice little canopy nest that she'd still be able to see from her bed.

Eleven smiled when she saw it. That was enough to assuage Christine's anger for the time being.

"Alright. Get in there, kid. Is that big enough?"

El crawled into the fort, assessing her surroundings before she nodded.

"Good. You want any water? Snack? No? Okay. I'm just gonna change, and then it's lights out."

Christine grabbed her own pajamas, stepping out to the bathroom to trade her sweats for shorts. She brushed her teeth, got her own glass of water, and was not surprised to find Eleven wide awake and waiting for her when she returned.

"Lights on," said Eleven, as Christine's hand went for the light switch. "Please."

"Wow," Christine said with a smile. "So they don't teach you 'brother,' and they don't teach you time, but they do teach you please and thank you. Alright. Lights on."

She double checked that her windows were locked and the curtains

were shut tight. Then she crawled into bed.

"I'll be right up here if you need anything," said Christine. "And if I'm asleep, you can just push me until I wake up. I won't be mad, okay?"

"Okay."

"Good. So…Goodnight, El."

"Night."

Christine smiled at her, and then laid down on her back. Her body was absolutely exhausted. She'd spent last night on a couch in an alcohol and grief induced haze, only to bike home and sit on the floor for a few hours. More biking, the baffling realization that she was being pulled into some kind of kidnapping scheme, a very long day of babysitting, followed by more biking, more walking, and stumbling onto an active crime scene. Every muscle of her body ached. But her emotional nerves seemed too raw to sleep.

She couldn't erase the image of Will's body from her mind. Then there was Nancy's voice, telling her that Barb was gone, and that it was all her fault. Then Barb's body would replace Will's on the stretcher. Christine would squeeze her eyes shut, and press her head a little farther into the pillow.

If her nightmares were this bad when she was awake, she couldn't even consider being unconscious.

But she wasn't the only one evading sleep.

"Who is Nancy?"

Christine rolled onto her side, looking at the fort where El was peeking under the sheets.

"Nancy is Mike's older sister. When you have the same parents, remember? She's my age."

"Friend?"

"Ha. She's supposed to be, yeah." Her laughter didn't make sense to

Eleven, and Christine struggled to explain. "Nancy's…done a lot of things friends shouldn't do. So I'm mad at her."

"Lie?" El asked.

"Yeah, for a start. Lie. Leave. Hurt. Blame."

"That's not friend."

"You'd think, right?" Christine frowned at her dresser. "But I guess I've been a bad friend too. I've blamed her for stuff. I've avoided her and called her names. Honestly, I don't know who's right and who's wrong anymore. I'm just…mad…"

Eleven nodded, though Christine wasn't entirely sure it was possible to understand. She hardly understood herself these days.

"Who is Barb?"

God, just hearing her name made Christine want to cry now.

"Barb's my other friend," she whispered. "She's been between me and Nancy this week, trying to make us friends again. And she had to put up with a lot of really dumb stuff. But now…no one can find her."

"Gone?"

"Yeah, for now."

"Like Will?"

"God, I hope not."

Christine choked back a sob, and chanced a glance at the fort in the corner. El was frowning too, staring at the ground. She was guarded in so many ways, but Christine still felt like she could read every expression that flicked across her face. Sadness, pity, guilt…

"Hey," Christine said, propping her head up on her elbow. "This isn't your fault, okay?"

"Mike…"

"I don't care what Mike said. He was upset, and he was hurt. So he hurt you instead. You were just trying to help, and…they were just sad it didn't work out."

Eleven looked at her from the floor, whispering imploringly, "Will."

"What about him?"

"Will," she repeated insistently.

That was it. Christine wasn't sure what she was trying to say. So she forced a small smile instead.

"It's okay, El. Look, I don't know what you showed the boys that made them think you had superpowers, but there's no way you could have known what happened to Will. It's not your fault."

Eleven pouted, and hugged her legs closer to her chest.

"Try not to worry about it for now, okay?" Christine offered. "Just get some rest, and we can talk about Will in the morning."

She rolled onto her other side, and squeezed her eyes shut. She would hold her breath until she passed out if she had to. She just wanted to stop thinking for a few minutes.

At some point in the night, she must have drifted asleep. There were no dreams, no nightmares about Will or Barb or Nancy. But one moment she was thinking she would never be able to fall asleep again, and the next moment someone was pushing insistently on her shoulder.

"Chrissy. Chrissy. Up. Chrissy! Up! Please!"

Christine jolted awake, clutching at her chest.

"Wha? What's—Eleven? Shit, what's—what's wrong? What's happening?"

"Chrissy, come!"

Small hands grabbed at her arm, pulling her out of bed and toward

the door. Panic seized her, and Christine stumbled to her feet, racing down the hallway and into the living room. She half expected to see soldiers in heavy stealth suits storming her living room, or the creature from The Thing hanging from the ceiling ready to eat them. Instead, the living room was empty—if not a little messier than it had been when she went to bed.

There were papers all over the floor. Her first thought was that her homework had been blown all over the room, but—no. It wasn't her assignments. It was Will's missing poster, all of them, spread out over the floor so his face could stare up at her.

"What the hell…?"

Eleven did not stop. She pulled Christine into the living room, forcing her to sit on a clear bit of floor. Then she walked over to the stereo, flipped a few switches, and powered it to life.

Loud static filled the room. Christine covered her ears, wincing as Eleven fiddled with the tuner controls. She wouldn't have been surprised if the static woke up the neighbors.

"El, stop," she pleaded. "You have to turn it down. And that's not how we play tapes. Remember, you have to press this, then…"

She reached for the stereo, only for Eleven to push her arm away. "Wait."

"Wait for what? For my ears to bleed?"

"Will."

"Will?" Christine sank back onto the floor. "El, we've been over this. Will is gone. There's nothing you could have done. You have to stop this."

"No. *Will."*

Christine sighed, watching in despair as Eleven continued to obsess over the controls. She did not know how to get through to her. It was quite possible there was no way. She was so sure of herself now, determined not to change her mind.

Whatever place Eleven was running from had clearly groomed her in a certain way. She knew how to behave and understand, but not how to communicate or navigate her surroundings. She'd been given no agency, and forced to accept whatever was presented to her as truth. Maybe that had something to do with the powers she thought she had. She had either been told she had these abilities, or convinced herself of it out of some psychological need for control.

Christine had read in books that people with dementia often had delusions to make sense of their reality. You weren't supposed to correct them, in case they became confused, or violent. Maybe brainwashing was the same way. She just had to play along.

"What is it, El?" she asked softly. "What do you need to show me?"

"Will," Eleven repeated, focusing on the radio. "Listen."

The static continued its assault on their ears. Christine waited a few seconds before jumping in.

"Is…Is that…? I hear it. I hear him."

"No."

Eleven gave her a sour look. Evidently, she'd been caught playing pretend. Christine sagged, pushing stray hairs out of her face.

"Look, El, I don't know what you're doing, okay? I don't know what we're doing here, and I don't know what you expect to hear. What I do know is that Will is…"

"Listen."

Christine bitterly closed her mouth. She would count to twenty, and then she was going to bed. This was ridiculous. She wasn't prepared for this kind of babysitting. She didn't get paid enough to deal with delusions. Hell, she didn't get paid at all. All she wanted to do was go to sleep and…

She heard it.

"Wha…?"

Eleven stopped moving the dial. She kept her hand on the stereo, her eyes squeezed shut. Like she was focusing super intensely. A thin trail of blood seeped from her nose.

And there was the sound again. There was still a curtain of static, but underneath it all, Christine could hear something. Someone humming. She glanced at Eleven, just to be sure. It didn't *look* like she was humming. Her throat was stock still. But before Christine could come up with another explanation, the sound changed.

"So come on and let me know…should I stay or should I go?"

That was definitely not Eleven.

Christine moved closer to the stereo, listening to the feeble voice. It definitely wasn't a radio broadcast. She'd heard that song by The Clash, and it didn't sound like that. It could have been radio interference, someone on a hamshack or supercomm nearby. But Christine had never experienced interference like this on the stereo. And there were only a handful of boys she knew who had supercomms.

"Is that…" she started, and this time she meant it. "Is that actually…?"

"Will," Eleven confirmed, with a small smile.

"You mean, he's…"

Eleven nodded.

"But…" Christine stared at the radio. "No. I mean, I saw his body. We all saw his body."

"Hiding," Eleven corrected, shaking her head.

"Hiding where, though? You brought us to his house today, and that's not where he is. That's exactly where everyone keeps looking for him."

"There," she said, nodding. "But…no."

"There but no?" Christine repeated. "What does that mean?"

Eleven frowned, clearly distressed that she could not find the words she wanted. The radio static flared, and Will's voice vanished.

"Woah, wait!" Christine leapt for the stereo, turning the dial back and forth. "Can we get it back? We need to—to record it or—or something!"

Eleven pushed her hands out of the way, and started the process all over again. But Christine had just been struck with another idea.

"Wait…could…could you find Barb like that?"

She watched as Eleven considered the notion, then nodded feebly. "Try."

"Okay. Try is—that's great. Hold on."

Christine jumped to her feet, racing down the hallway and back to her room. She scanned the corkboard over her desk. There were plenty of pictures of her, Nancy and Barb. They tried to take pictures with the whole group as often as they could. But Christine didn't want to confuse Eleven by showing her Nancy too. She finally selected a picture of her and Barb from a recent sleepover. They were splayed out on the floor, heads next to each other as they lay in opposite directions. Christine had her tongue poking out, while Barb's face was red from laughing so hard. Nancy had jumped up on the couch to take the picture. It was a good one.

She careened back into the living room, passing the picture to Eleven with a trembling hand.

"She's the one on the right. With the red hair. Obviously, you know. The one that's not me. Sorry, um…"

But Eleven wasn't listening to her rambling. She stared intently at the picture, as if she was memorizing every detail before closing her eyes. Then she brought her hand back up to the stereo, and spun the dial.

Christine held her breath as she watched the needle move. Nothing was happening. That was bad, right? Had it taken this long to find Will? Was it because Eleven had found him already? She knew she was being impatient, but she was so nervous she could have hurled

again.

Time ticked by. The static grew to be a comfortable white noise, and Christine's ears zeroed in on the clock instead. Each tick felt like a bang against a gong, echoing inside of her skull. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

She counted as the seconds turned into minutes. It definitely hadn't taken this long before. Weird sounds were beginning to come through the stereo, but none of them sounded like Barb. Cats and whimpers and strangled moans. Even the snippets of commercials there were passing sounded eerie in quick succession.

The dial spun faster, and Christine watched as blood began to trickle out of Eleven's other nostril.

"El…?"

The girl didn't respond. She squeezed her eyes closed tighter, her hand steady on the radio. Christine was afraid to touch her in case—what? Would she lash out? Would it fry her brain? Would Christine get electrocuted or thrown across the room?

Blood seeped from her ear, and Christine threw caution to the wind.

"Eleven, stop!"

She grabbed the hand that was on the stereo and broke the contact. Eleven's eyes bugged open with a gasp, and she immediately sagged into Christine's arms. She was pale, her skin slick with sweat, and Christine could have traced the purple veins in her forehead.

"Shit. Shit! Shit, shit, shit…"

She scooped Eleven up into her arms, rushing back into the bedroom. Carefully as she could, she laid her out on the bed. She was still breathing at least, though it wasn't a huge comfort. What if Eleven had fried herself trying to contact Barb, just because Christine had asked—if she couldn't do it again, or didn't wake up at all?

Christine pushed the thought aside and ran back to the kitchen. She began grabbing things at random. Paper towels, regular towels,

glasses of water, soap, bread, for some reason. She piled it all back into her arms and sprinted back to her bedroom.

It was a good thing Eleven was already blinking her eyes open. Otherwise Christine might've had a heart attack.

"Hey, no," she hushed urgently, as Eleven tried to sit up. "Lie down, it's okay. I got you."

El didn't put up much of a fight as Christine fussed over her. She cleaned the blood from her face, and then did another onceover for the sweat. Eleven's eyes were only half open, but Christine could still feel herself being watched as she worked. She only let Eleven sit up long enough to take a couple sips of water. Then she lowered her back to the bed, and pulled the blanket up to her chin.

"God, I'm so sorry," Christine whispered, shaking her head. "I never would have asked if I knew it would take so much out of you. I don't know what I was thinking."

"Sorry."

"No," said Christine. "No, you don't have to be sorry. You tried to find her and that's—that's way more than I should've asked. It's…It's more than I've done, anyway."

Christine bit her lip, smoothing the blanket unnecessarily. She'd been spread thin over the last few days, but she couldn't help feeling like she was failing on all fronts. She was pushing Eleven after less than a day. She couldn't even have a conversation with Nancy without screaming. She'd been so wrapped up in herself that she hadn't even noticed Barb had vanished. The punches just kept coming.

Something brushed her hand, and Christine snapped out of her reverie. Eleven's hand was hovering over her own, like she was still debating if she wanted to take it. She pursed her lips tight when Christine looked at her, and let her hand fall the rest of the way.

"Chrissy. I understand."

Christine took a shaky breath, grinning as she wiped her eyes. She'd had enough of crying over the last five days. It was a wonder her

body still had tears to produce.

"Just get some rest, El," she offered softly. "I'll talk to the boys in the morning and we'll figure out what to do. We'll find them."

Eleven nodded, her eyes already starting to droop. But she had one more question before she fell asleep.

"Stay?"

"Yeah," Christine assured her, moving to lie down next to the bed. "It's okay. I'm gonna stay."

12. Gone Like Will

Christine did not get a lot of sleep. She was uncomfortable on the floor, and her anxiety kept waking her up. It was silly anxiety too. Nothing about Will or Barb or big scary monsters. She woke up every twenty minutes, just to make sure the sound of her alarm clock wouldn't scare Eleven.

At six o'clock, the clock beeped loudly and Christine pounced. With practiced discipline, she slammed her pillow over the speaker, pressed snooze, and then flipped the alarm button off. There was a beat of silence as she waited. But Eleven didn't stir.

Feeling exceedingly proud of herself, Christine got to her feet and stretched her arms far up over her head. She went to grab some clothes, only to jump herself. Eleven was watching her from the bed, doing a very poor job of smothering her amused smile.

"What are you doing awake?" Christine scolded quietly.

Eleven shrugged, her smile growing.

Christine narrowed her eyes. "Alright, troublemaker. Then you can get up."

She'd been expecting something of an argument—as much of an argument as you could have with someone who spoke in one word sentences—but Eleven didn't put up much of a fight. She seemed content enough to follow Christine to the bathroom and copy her morning routine. Christine had been half afraid Eleven might not know how to brush her teeth. But it seemed wherever she'd grown up, she'd been taught basic hygiene at least. When given the choice between her sweats from yesterday and an old pair of Christine's jeans, Eleven had meekly gravitated toward Mike's clothes. Christine smiled, but didn't comment.

There was no discussion wasted on breakfast. Christine put two waffles in the toaster for Eleven, and ate her fill of Cheerios while she waited.

At six thirty, they snuck out through the back door. Christine led the way next door, creeping along the side of the Henderson house until she got to the window she wanted. The problem being, of course, that Dustin's bedroom did not have regular windows. They were up high, only about a foot and a half tall. If they wanted to talk to Dustin, they'd have to be creative.

"Alright," said Christine, lacing her fingers together. "Just like we talked about."

Eleven nodded nervously, and placed her foot into Christine's hands. They counted to three, and Eleven hoisted herself up. She swung a leg around Christine's neck so she was sitting on her shoulders, her hands steadying herself on the side of the house.

"You okay?" There was a small hum of approval, and Christine tentatively stepped closer to the house. "Okay. Go ahead."

Eleven raised a hand and tentatively rapped on the glass. It took her a few times to get a response. But when she did, there was no way Christine could miss it.

"AAAHHHHHHH!"

Dustin's screams could be heard clear through the brick wall, which means they could definitely be heard through the rest of the house. Christine heard a door slam, and bent her knees just in time to whip Eleven out of sight.

"Dusty?" Mrs. Henderson's voice was muffled through the closed window. "Dusty, what's wrong? Are you okay?"

"Oh my God—um—uh—yeah! Yeah, Mom, I just had…I was having a nightmare."

"Aw, sweetheart. I know that with everything going on…"

"It's fine, Mom! I—I really don't want to talk about it."

"Are you sure, Dusty? I don't want you to bottle this up. We need to be able to talk about things like this. You're growing up so fast, and I don't want you to feel closed off from me."

"Fine! I'll—Mom, I promise I'll tell you about it later, but right now it's—goddamn, it's six thirty in the morning?!"

"Dusty! Language!"

"Sorry, ah—I just mean, I'm—I'm really tired, so I—I wanna go back to bed."

"Are you going to be alright, honey? Are you sure you can fall asleep?"

"Yes, Mom!"

"Do you want some warm milk?"

"No, Mom! I just wanna go to bed!"

"Okay! Alright, but I'm here if you need anything, sweetie pie. Always."

"Thanks. Thank you, Mom. I love you!"

"I love you too, Dusty."

Christine waited until she heard the door close to straighten her aching legs. It was good that Eleven was so thin. If she were any bigger Christine was sure her legs would have broken mid-squat.

The window slid open overhead, and Dustin's voice floated through.

"Are you trying to give me a heart attack? What the hell are you guys doing?"

"Dustin," Christine called up, keeping her voice as low as she could. "Listen, it's about Will!"

"Christine, I don't want to talk about it. I'm serious!"

"Well suck it up, dude! Mike was right!"

"About what?" he hissed. "That we were wasting our time last night? My legs feel like they're gonna fall off."

"No! About Eleven. She knows where Will is!"

"Well *clearly* she doesn't!" He huffed, and started to close the window again. "I'm going back to bed."

"Dustin, wait! You were right, okay? El has powers. She showed me."

The window stopped moving.

"You showed her?" he asked Eleven, who must have nodded. "What did you do?"

"It's like I was saying with the TV," Christine explained to the house siding. "I think she can control radio waves. Last night, she was staring at Will's picture and then I heard his voice through my stereo."

"He was talking to you?"

"No, he—he was singing. That song by The Clash. It sounded like he was just humming to himself."

"So she was like, channeling him? Like a ghost? Is Will a *ghost?"*

"Dustin, I don't know. I just know that—that you were right. Something weird is going on, and we need to figure out what."

There was a pause as Dustin considered the information.

"I don't know, Christine. If Will really is dead, then we can't bring him back. It would upset the cosmic balance."

Christine rolled her eyes. "If Will is dead and his spirit's roaming the earth, don't you want to make sure he's put to rest?"

There were a few more seconds of consideration.

"Sure. What do you need me to do?"

"Call Mike and Lucas," Christine instructed, hoisting Eleven a little higher on her shoulders. "You guys need to come to my place stat."

"Okay. Please hold."

They waited patiently for Dustin to turn on his supercomm, and listened as he tried his best to get Lucas's attention.

"Lucas, this is Dustin. Do you copy? …Lucas, this is Dustin. Do you copy? …Lucas, this is Dustin. I asked if you goddamn copied!"

"Dustin," Lucas's tinny voice sighed from the radio. *"Leave me alone."*

"No can-do, ranger. This is a mission issue, and all party members have to report immediately. Over."

"I'm not in the mood, Dustin. Over and out."

"Lucas! Lucas, don't you hand up on me! I'm serious, dude! I'm gonna steal your wrist rocket! I'm gonna take your prized Spider-Man issue and give it to Erica as a coloring book! Lucas!"

"Give me the radio," Christine demanded.

"What? No," Dustin said protectively. "This is for bard-use only. Get your own!"

"Dustin. Give me. The God. Damn. Radio."

Wordlessly, Dustin passed the walkie to Eleven, who handed it down to Christine. She had to shift Eleven on her shoulders again, jamming the call button down with slightly too much force.

"Lucas, this is Christine. Do you copy?"

"Christine?"

"Of course he answers," Dustin grumbled somewhere above her.

"Why do you have Dustin's walkie? I thought it was bard-use only. Over."

"Cause this is an emergency, Lucas. I need you to call Mike. Party meeting at my house. Over."

"What? Why? Over."

"It doesn't matter why. Because I told you to. Over!"

"I don't know, Christine. After last night…I don't really want to have any party meetings. And I don't think Mike does either. Over."

Christine let out a strangled noise of frustration.

"Lucas. Would I, Christine Walcott, have called a party meeting if it wasn't important? Over."

"…I guess not…Over."

"And would I, Christine Walcott, have taken Dustin's walkie if it wasn't important? Over."

"…No. Over."

"Great. So you can call Mike and tell him that there is a mandatory party meeting at my house. And if you two aren't here by eight, I'm gonna call all your parents and tell them how you were lying about AV club yesterday, and how you broke police curfew twice. Over."

"Christine!"

"Eight o'clock, Lucas. Over and out."

She passed the walkie back up to Eleven, who handed it to Dustin, who very slowly retracted it into the house.

"Woah," he breathed in awe. "Shit just got really real."

"Hop to it, Dustin," said Christine, helping Eleven down from her shoulders. "Eight o'clock."

Needless to say, the party had not been pleased by the surprise meeting. Dustin had wandered over without a fuss, telling his mom he was leaving for school. Then he walked next door and parked himself on Christine's couch, digging through the box of Pop Tarts he'd stolen. Lucas had shown up next, sullen and bleary eyed, but present. Mike, of course, had gone off the moment the front door closed.

"Just who do you think you are?" he demanded of Christine, yelling in the front hall. "You're not a part of the party, Christine! You don't

get to call party meetings! You don't get to use the supercomms, and you definitely don't get to blackmail us!"

"Are you done?" Christine asked coolly.

"No! Because last night sucked, and you're just trying to drag the whole thing out! We don't want to talk about it! We just want to be alone, and think about our friend, and…"

"Will's alive," Christine interrupted. "At least, I think he is. Eleven showed me her powers, and I think it's something you should all hear. Okay?"

Mike stared at her, mouth agape. When he could not muster a new argument, Christine smiled. She dragged him into the living room and deposited him on the couch between Lucas and Dustin. Eleven sat in the corner, next to the stereo, and Christine began to pace.

It took her a few minutes to get through the story again. The boys kept interrupting, already speculating about what she had heard or how Eleven was doing it before she could get the whole description out. Despite how output Mike had been the night before, he was the first to change his tune at her story.

"That's Will's song!" he exclaimed after Christine had hummed a few bars. "It's his favorite! It's gotta be him!"

"No, it doesn't," Lucas sighed in exasperation. "Loads of people like that song."

"No they don't. It's weird."

"Will is not the only one who likes it, otherwise they wouldn't have made it! I'm just saying Christine could have picked up a transmission of someone else singing the stupid song."

"But it sounded like Will, right?" asked Mike.

"I mean, yeah," Christine said with a shrug. "It sounded like him to me."

"What good does that do us?" Lucas demanded. "No offense, Chrissy,

but it's not like you hang out with us all the time. How are you supposed to know what Will sounds like?"

"Um, hello?" Dustin interrupted. "Are we gonna talk about the fact that Eleven was using Christine's *stereo* as a *walkie talkie?* Like, how insane is that?"

"We already knew she was insane," Lucas scoffed.

"Hey," Mike snapped. "Take that back."

"Me? You were the one asking what was wrong with her last night!"

"Yeah, well I was wrong!"

"No, we weren't! She tried to bring us to Will's house, and he's not there! Even if he was alive, how is she supposed to help us find him?"

"Shut up," Christine ordered. "We don't know how Eleven's powers work. Which is why we're—carefully—gonna test them today."

"We are?" asked Dustin.

"Yeah. I think if we use the supercomms, something that's actually designed for communication, we could get a better read. And even if El can't see where Will is, we might be able to hear something else. We can listen to what he's saying, what we hear in the background…"

"Context clues," Mike agreed excitedly. "That could tell us where he is!"

"Great," said Lucas flatly. "Even if that was a solid plan, it sounds like it's gonna take a while. And we're supposed to be at school."

"School?" Christine repeated incredulously. "Fuck school!"

The boys gasped, staring up at her in awe. Christine rolled her eyes and continued.

"You guys have the—the craziest opportunity right now. Your friend is missing, and you have the chance to prove that he's not dead. You can save him! Just like you save each other in all your campaigns.

You can save someone's life, and that—that is so much more important than learning how to read trick questions on tests or fill in the bubbles on Scantrons! School will still be there tomorrow. But if we're not careful, Will won't be. So are we gonna do this or not?"

She turned back to the couch. All three boys were still gaping at her, clearly absorbing little to nothing she'd said after the cuss.

"Boys!"

"Sorry!" Dustin yelped, as if she'd smacked him. "Yes. I'm in."

"Thank you. Mike?"

"Yeah. Let's do it."

Everyone turned to look at Lucas, who was still frowned at the carpet.

"Come on, man," Dustin said imploringly. "What's one more day of hoping?"

Lucas grit his teeth, but nodded. "For Will."

"Awesome," Christine said, smiling for the first time since she'd started. "You've all got your comms, right? It can take some time, so we need the one with the highest charge."

They boys all turned to their backpacks, but before they could start comparing walkies, Eleven spoke up from the corner.

"Chrissy?" She pointed at Mike's watch, which was still around her wrist. "Eight-three-zero."

"Shit," Christine sighed, deflating on the spot.

"Shit what?" asked Dustin. "What happens at eight-three-zero?"

"Nothing. I've gotta go to school."

"School?" Mike demanded. "What happened to 'fuck school'?!"

"Language, Mike."

"You said it first!"

"Look," she snapped, "I'm not going to school for school. I have to go talk to the cops."

This explanation only inspired outrage.

"The cops?!" Mike yelled. "Are you insane?!"

"What happened to no grown-ups?" asked Lucas.

"You said you'd be cool, Christine!" screeched Dustin. "This is *not* cool!"

"Relax!" she yelled over all of them. "It's not about Eleven. This is something else."

"Will could be dead," Mike snarled at her. "What's more important than this?"

Christine wasn't sure if she had the heart to answer. Thankfully, someone else did it for her.

"Barb," Eleven said softly.

"You mean your friend Barb?" Dustin asked, scrunching up his nose. "Like you, Nancy and Barb, Barb? What's wrong with her?"

"Gone."

Christine bit her lip, enduring the silence that followed Eleven's succinct explanation.

"She's gone?" asked Mike slowly. "Gone…like Will?"

"We don't know," Christine sighed. "But no one's heard from her in a few days, and…knowing what we do…"

Everyone exchanged a dark look. Knowing what they knew, there was a good chance Barb was in trouble. Trapped or injured at the very least, and if not…

"Go." Lucas stood from the couch, nodding firmly to Christine. "We

can take care of this."

"Yeah," Dustin agreed, standing up as well. "Sometimes the party has to divide and conquer to complete a quest. Find out what you can about Barb, and we'll find out about Will."

Christine raised an eyebrow at Mike, who took his place between them. He nodded sincerely, and Christine nodded back.

"Okay. But the four of you *stay here* okay? The last thing I need to worry about is you guys getting sniffed out by mad scientists or monsters or something. I shouldn't be gone for more than an hour or two. I'm just gonna go to school, give my statement, and come back. Keep the doors locked, and the curtains closed. Don't open the door for anyone except me, got it?"

There was a murmur of agreement. It didn't exactly instill confidence, but what other choice did she have? Will had three extremely determined friends in his corner. Barb couldn't say the same. Christine was the closest to knowing the truth, so she'd have to give it everything she had.

She grabbed her backpack, lingering by the door as the boys compared their walkie talkies. Eleven was still sitting by the stereo. She was watching Christine, looking just as nervous as when they'd met. Only now Christine was leaving instead of getting too close.

"I'll be back soon," she assured her. "Promise."

"We get it, Chrissy," said Mike, rolling his eyes. "We're not kids, okay?"

Christine threw him a look of annoyance and twirled her keys around her finger. "Fine. Just take care of each other, okay? And remember. This door stays locked."

The boys waved her off. So with one final smile at Eleven, Christine headed out to the driveway.

Her journey to Hawkins High was shorter than it had ever been before. She cruised fearlessly through traffic, ignoring angry honks from cars and forcing people to scatter on the sidewalk. She didn't

care if she looked like an idiot. She just wanted to get in, get out, and get the whole thing over with.

Out of habit, Christine walked to her locker. She already had the stupid thing open by the time she remembered she didn't actually want to go to class. The best thing to do would be to go to homeroom and wait until someone came to interview her. That would be the least suspicious thing to do, anyway. But as the memory of last night's phone call with Nancy swam in her mind, she made a firm decision. She was not going to go to any class.

She slammed her locker shut, and jumped in surprise.

"Steve!"

"Hey, stranger." He was leaning casually on the wall next to her, though his smirk faded at her jumpiness. "Woah, you okay? You look like you saw a ghost."

Christine withheld a joke about finding a dead body the night before.

"Yeah, I'm—I'm fine. You just surprised me. I didn't think you knew where my locker was."

"Give me some credit. I notice things." He winced at her pointed look. "Okay, so I got lucky. I just wanted check on you. Not like my studious lab partner to skip school."

"Yeah," she sighed with a dry laugh. "Let's just say I won't be touching the whiskey again anytime soon."

"Aw, that's a shame. I thought you took it like a champ. Didn't know you were such a party animal."

"Unfortunately, my stomach would disagree."

"But the aspirin helped, right?"

That made Christine pause. "…Aspirin?"

"Yeah," he said plainly. "I left some out on the table. Was gone when I woke up, so I figured you must've found it."

"Wait," she said, shaking her head as if the thought would fall into place. She'd almost forgotten about the meds and the mysterious blanket. "That was you?"

"Well, yeah. I woke up around two to take a leak and found you on the couch. Figured it was the least I could do, considering…uh…"

"That my friends ditched me," she said sourly. "Yeah. Thanks."

"I mean…well, yeah, I guess…" He scratched the back of his neck until another thought occurred to him. "Oh! That actually reminds me…"

Steve fished into his bag, pulling out a single page of paper. They were physics notes, half-hearted ones anyway. He'd doodled little magnets and compasses in the corners, more worried about drawing than capturing the information of the lecture. But she supposed it was the thought that counted. Her anger from Tuesday was suddenly a distant memory.

"I know they're not as good as yours, but…"

"Wow," she said, unable to hide a grin. "Thanks a lot."

"Well, you know me," he said, popping the color of his striped polo. "I'm just your regular scholar… On an unrelated note, you are coming to class today, right? I don't think I can manage that two days in a row."

"Sorry, partner. You're gonna have to survive alone." He groaned as she tucked the paper into her bag, and she offered him a small smirk of her own. "I'm uh…just here to talk to the cops. Then I'm going home again."

"Oh, right. Barbara. So you talked to Nancy, then."

"Uh, yeah. That's one word for it."

"Yeah." To her surprise, Steve scoffed and leaned his head back against the lockers. "She kinda freaked on me too."

"Why?" Christine asked curiously.

"Eh, it's nothing. With all these cops and stuff, I'm just worried about my old man finding out the party. He's seriously gonna hand me my ass if word gets out. And she…I don't know. She said I was being insensitive. That I didn't care enough about Barb."

Christine bit her lip. Privately, she thought that Nancy was probably a little bit right. But the last thing she wanted to do was agree with her, and Steve looked legitimately dejected. So she leaned her shoulder next to him.

"Well, it's not like you can't care about two things at once, right?"

"Yes! Exactly! But she just totally blew me off. I didn't even get a chance to explain."

"She's just worried. All of us are."

"Yeah, I know. I do! I—I know."

He nodded to himself, and Christine let herself get caught up in watching the way his hair bounced. Maybe that's why she was so caught off guard when he turned to face her, ducking his head low.

"Can you just do me a favor?" he pleaded lowly. "When you talk to the cops, just—just don't mention the beers. Or the whiskey."

"Oh…I don't know, Steve…"

"Come on, Chrissy. It's just as much for Barbara as it is for me. Tell me the cops aren't gonna hear 'drunk teens' and just stop asking questions. If something really happened to her, people have to take us seriously. So…please, please, please just…don't say anything. You can just say you brought a movie to my house and we were all chilling together. You'd be saving Barb's life, and mine."

She hated how close he was standing. It made it very hard to process the words when all she could think about was the way he smelled. She shivered involuntarily, trying to kick her brain back into motion. He had a point. Somewhere, she was pretty sure he had a point. Barb was gone. It would be better if the police didn't think they were just a bunch of dumb, drunk kids.

"Yeah," Christine breathed, blinking hard as she forced the words out. "Yeah, no, I—I totally get it. You're right."

Steve gave her a blinding smile, which did not do much to help her breathing.

"God, you're the best. Have I told you lately that you're the best? You're the best." He patted the wall of lockers, and with a wink, jogged away from her down the hallway. "Anyway, feel better! See ya around!"

He was gone in a matter of seconds, leaving Christine to wonder if Steve had ever told her that she was the best at all. She damned her fluttering heart and banged her head into her locker. Having a crush totally sucked.

Christine did not want to go to homeroom, but there was another problem she had to face. She did not know when the police would get to the high school, or where they'd be interviewing students. Figuring she'd try her luck in the office, she marched toward the front of the school. Thankfully, it was one of the few times this week she'd been lucky.

"Jackpot," she whispered, peering through the window.

Two men in blue uniforms were signing in at the front desk. Christine didn't give herself time to think or second guess. She just walked into the office, and tapped the closest man on the shoulder.

"Can I help you?" he asked, sounding slightly annoyed by the intrusion. He was the older of the two—Powell, if his badge name was right.

"Yeah," said Christine. "You guys are here to ask about Barb, right? Barbara Holland?"

"And?" He squinted down at her suspiciously. "What's it to you?"

"Barb's my friend. I just want to help."

"That's great," said his partner, a slightly weedier man with glasses, "but you're just gonna have to wait your turn, kid. Aren't you gonna

be late for class?"

The bell rang on cue. A few lingering students in the hallway scrambled, and the two officers chuckled.

"Welp," Officer Powell sighed. "Looks like you're late now."

"Oh, I'm not going to class," Christine assured them.

The men exchanged a look. The second officer cleared his throat, whispering to Powell. "Did she just tell two cops that she's skipping class?"

"I have to." Christine tried to swallow her nerves, keeping her face blank as she lied her ass off. "I've been super sick the past few days. I went to the doctor and I'm supposed to be on bedrest, but…this is really important."

"Right," Powell said doubtfully. "Well, can't help you either way. You're a minor. Means we're gonna need a parent or guardian present before we talk to you. So why don't you head to class until your dad or whoever…?"

"Yeah, that's not gonna work. My dad's on a business trip in Atlanta for the rest of the week."

"Then you can wait for your mom."

"Not exactly an option."

The officers looked at each other again. She couldn't tell if they were debating the situation, her story or her stupidity. Any which way, she didn't have time for it.

"Look, I don't care, okay? I waive my right to a guardian or whatever. I just want to help find Barb."

"I don't think that's how it works," said the one with the glasses.

"Why not?" Christine demanded. "It's just a customary interview, right? People waive their own rights all the time."

"Well *people* are stupid," Powell bit in annoyance. "Look. What's your name, kid?"

"Christine Walcott."

Powell had been about to say something, but he stopped himself. Suddenly, his expression was a lot more serious. His partner pulled out a notebook, flipping through a couple pages to read.

"Walcott?" he asked, and Christine nodded. "Well, shit."

"Yeah, you're telling me," grumbled Powell. "You wanna call the chief or should I?"

"Uh, no. I'm…I'm gonna let you do that."

"Chicken."

Powell walked away without an explanation, tugging the radio from his belt. Christine made to follow him, only for the other man to step into her way. She finally got a look at his nametag, which named him Callahan.

"What's going on?" she asked, trying to peer over his shoulder. "Telling the chief what?"

"Nothing you've got to be concerned about," he said as he herded her back to the desk. "Are you sure you can't just go to class?"

"No."

Callahan sighed, readjusting his wide-brimmed hat. "You know, I wish someone had told me what a hassle this job was gonna be. This was supposed to be an easy paycheck, you know? Write a couple parking tickets, patrol a few streets…"

He rambled on, but Christine was not listening. She squinted over his shoulder, trying to hear what Powell was saying into the radio. His back was turned, but she could make out enough to guess.

"Walcott," he repeated. Something, something, something, and then, "last one who saw her alive."

Somehow, the grainy response on the radio came through even clearer.

"Hey, I've got enough on my plate without walking you idiots through procedure. If she says she wants to talk, then let her talk. Just take the statement and move on."

"Alright," sighed Powell, shaking his head. "But I ain't doin' the paperwork."

Christine smiled victoriously. Either that or Powell's heavy sigh alerted Callahan to the conclusion, and he let out a pissy groan. "Seriously?"

"Hopper says it's a go," Powell said with a shrug. "Hey, don't look at me. Peggy, you got somewhere quiet we can set up?"

A few minutes later, Christine was following Officers Powell and Callahan down the halls to the cafeteria. It almost felt strange to be there. She'd been avoiding it for a week, after all. The long tables were already set up, chairs neatly tucked in by the janitors the night before. They made a terrible, echoing screech when Christine tried to sit down, making her wince.

"So, Miss Walcott," Powell started, folding his hands on the lunch table. "Just to be clear, you are knowingly waiving your right to have a parent or guardian present during this conversation?"

"Am I under arrest or something?" Christine asked doubtfully.

"Should you be?"

Christine's stomach lurched. She was already regretting coming.

"Look, I just want to find my friend," she said, shaking her head. "So yeah. I waive my right. Whatever."

Callahan laid out his notebook, hastily jotting that down. It didn't help to put her at ease.

"Alright. Why don't we start with the last time you saw your friend?"

"Tuesday night," Christine answered. "Probably around ten o'clock?"

"And where were you?" asked Powell.

"We were at the Harringtons' place. Just hanging out with a couple of friends."

"Hanging out?" Callahan repeated. "Ten o'clock on a school night? So, would you say it was like a party?"

"Not really," Christine said carefully. She was trying to calculate how much the police could already know. "I mean, Steve's parents weren't home, yeah. But it just meant we could listen to music really loud. We were watching movies, talking. Normal stuff."

Another skeptical look. Christine did not acknowledge it.

"And where was Barbara the last time you saw her?" asked Powell.

"Sitting next to me on the couch," she said honestly. "I…wasn't feeling well. So she was taking care of me, and I kind of passed out."

"You were at this party, and you fell asleep on the couch?" Callahan clarified. "At this boy—Steve's house? Where was everyone else?"

"Well…Barb and I were downstairs. Everyone else had been messing around in the pool, so as far as I know they just went upstairs to… change."

"Who is everyone else?"

"Um, Steve, Carol, and Tommy H. And Nancy."

"You said everyone went in the pool," said Powell. "Why not you? What were you and Barbara doing?"

Christine bit her lip. This part of the story was hard to tell without the beers.

"Well, I got to Steve's house a little late. Probably not until like, nine o'clock, nine thirty. And we were all hanging around by the pool. I wasn't really paying attention, but I think Barb…fell. There's a lot of

woods in the backyard, so she accidentally cut herself on a rock. Her hand was bleeding pretty bad. I took her inside to find the bathroom, and that's when everyone jumped in the pool. By the time we got the bleeding to slow down, everyone was already getting out again. And then…"

She trailed off. What had happened next was not something she particularly wanted to relive. She wasn't proud of the part she'd played in her last moments with Barb, and she wasn't thrilled about the way things had gone with Nancy either. Surely the police didn't need to know all of that.

Nancy's voice echoed around Christine's head.

"It's not my fault you decided to have a breakdown on the couch. If you'd left together, none of this would have happened."

"And then?" Powell prompted her.

Christine's jaw clenched.

"I came out to ask Steve if he had a first aid kit anywhere. He went to go find one, and Tommy and Carol went upstairs together. Then I kind of got into a fight with Nancy because—well, she thought I was overreacting about Barb's cut, but I thought it looked really bad. Like she could need stitches or something. And I tried to tell her that, but she wouldn't listen. And then she went upstairs to change and…and she…she didn't come back down."

There was a pang of guilt as the officers exchanged another look. But she wasn't entirely sorry.

"And that's about the time you started feeling *sick?"* Callahan asked her.

The double meaning wasn't lost on her, but all she could do was shrug.

"Yeah. I went to lie down on the couch, and Barb…like I said, she was comforting me. And then I fell asleep. When I woke up, it was about six in the morning? Tommy and Carol had gone home, there was no Nancy, and…I couldn't find Barb anywhere."

Callahan nodded, scribbling something onto his notepad. "And you said you went to Steve's alone, right? You didn't arrive with Nancy and Barbara?"

"Yeah. I rode my bike there later."

"So you don't know how they got to the party?"

"Well, I talked to Barb before she left," Christine offered. "Like, after dinner. She said she had to go pick Nancy up. She's the only one of us who has a car, so she usually drives everywhere. But I didn't see her car when I got there anyway."

"Nowhere?" asked Powell. "And you don't know where she would've parked?"

"No. I figured she might've walked the last few blocks just in case… um…well. Because her car wasn't at the house and she was, you know. But I didn't actually see it."

"And you didn't look for it in the morning?"

"No? Like I said, I couldn't find anyone. I just figured she drove Nancy home."

"Right." Powell nodded, stroking his chin thoughtfully. "Well, your friend Nancy says that she went back to look for the car when she noticed Miss Holland was missing. She said that as of four o'clock yesterday, the car was still there, but…we haven't been able to find any trace of it. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that?"

Christine shook her head. It hadn't even occurred to her to look for Barb's car, though that would have been a good place to start. She wondered why Nancy hadn't mentioned it on the phone.

"Miss Wheeler also stopped by the Harrington house yesterday," said Callahan, and he narrowed his eyes at a particular line on his book. "She wanted to search the woods behind the house, and said that she saw 'a man or a bear or something, something big that growled at her.' Do you remember seeing anything matching that description?"

She shook her head again. That Nancy *definitely* hadn't mentioned on

the phone.

"Do you know if Nancy's ever been under the influence? Maybe smoking suspect cigarettes?"

Callahan yelled at the sharp elbow he got from Powell.

"Christine," Powell continued, "has Miss Holland ever talked to you about leaving Hawkins? Maybe running away, or where she might go to get some alone time?"

"Not really," Christine said feebly. "Out of all of us, I felt like Barbara was most comfortable in Hawkins. She wanted to go to college, but she was only gonna go as far as Tech. She never wanted to live in the city or move to the country. She liked things here."

"Do you think the party could have changed that?" asked Callahan. "Maybe she felt like your friend group was struggling? Maybe she was a little…I don't know, *jealous* that Nancy went upstairs to change her clothes, while she was stuck—I mean—when she was comforting you instead?"

"No. Seriously," she added, before they could exchange another look. "Barb was never really into boy gossip. She didn't like Steve. She was only really there because Nancy dragged her."

"I see. And you don't think that maybe she…was jealous of Steve?"

That line of questioning was shut down by Powell, who sent a death glare to his partner.

"One last thing, Miss Walcott," he said, sitting farther forward in his chair. "Now, we know that you probably don't have anything to do with your friend's disappearance. We know everyone's taking this really hard, and that things have been a little…dramatic around town lately. But we've got to check all our boxes. So we had a chat with the attendance office. Can you tell us why you skipped your last classes before the party? And why you skipped the entire day after?"

A montage of her own moping played back in her head, followed by a resurging wave of nausea and the stress headache she'd been putting off since taking in Eleven. There were a lot of reasons she'd

skipped school in the last week. She didn't plan on going into detail about any of them with the cops.

"I told you," she said flatly. "I've been really sick."

"Right," Callahan said flippantly. "Well you've gotta know that it looks a little weird. You're the last person that saw Barbara, and you conveniently skip the next two days of school. Not to mention you don't look all that sick."

"It's not a cold. I'm having…stomach problems."

"Uh huh," said Powell. "Alcohol-induced stomach problems?"

"No, they're…female-induced stomach problems…" The men stared at her blankly, and Christine gave a dramatic wince. "Um…girl problems?"

The officers immediately recoiled.

"Oh! Oh, no, that's not…"

"You don't gotta tell us about that."

"No, yeah, that's…"

"Well you need an alibi or something, right?" Christine asked, feigning confusion. "I've been getting these awful cramps. Like, I can't even get out of bed unless…"

"Woah, woah, woah!" Callahan waved a hand. "That's—You know, I think that's probably a really personal issue? And without a parent or guardian here…"

"Exactly," Powell agreed.

"Yeah, you—you probably shouldn't discuss that with anyone. We'll—We'll just take note of it."

"Suit yourself." Christine gave them a tight smile. "Anything else?"

"No," said Powell with a weary shake of his head. "No, if we think of

anything else, we'll contact you."

"Great."

She collected her things and headed for the door, somehow even angrier and more anxious than she'd been before. She didn't know what she expected. The police were not going to find Barbara, because Barbara hadn't just run away. She was like Will. If she did something, she did it with the support of her friends. She wouldn't have gone off alone. If she was gone, something had happened to her, and it looked like the police weren't ready to believe that just yet.

Christine ignored the concerned looks of teachers as she marched back out the door. She grabbed and mounted her bike in one swift motion, barely needing to stop. If anyone could find Barbara, it was Eleven. And that mean she needed to get home immediately.

13. The Forefront of Scientific Research

Christine—Needed a bigger radio. Gone to AV club. Be back soon.

Christine crumpled the note in her hand as she trudged up the steps to Hawkins Middle School. Her legs were screaming at her to stop moving, just for a while. She was getting seriously tired of all the running around. She was gonna kill Mike Wheeler when she found him.

Walking into the middle school always felt weird. Well, it hadn't when she was still a student. She was only a year and a half out and already the halls seemed smaller than she remembered. Had she really sat at a desk that tiny in her English class? Or was that desk the same as the one she used now, only shrunken by memories?

That was one thing that made the hallways seem weird. All those memories. Her locker had been down this hallway one year. She remembered getting the zipper of her sweatshirt stuck in the door, and Barb nearly tearing her arm off trying to get it open again. That was the side door she usually left through when it was time to go to the high school for science. There was the athletics department corkboard, still full of photos of the school's teams. Once she'd stolen a polaroid of Steve off when she thought no one was looking. It was probably still sitting in her desk at home.

The other thing that made it weird was the people. Or rather, the lack thereof. Christine had spent the entire ride to the school thinking of excuses, prepared to run into a concerned teacher who would want her off premises. But there was no one in sight. She peeked into a few classrooms, swung by the cafeteria, only to be met by silence at every turn. No one was hanging around.

She wasn't surprised to find the door to the AV closet locked. It usually stayed that way until it was time for a meeting. She knocked hopefully anyway, and called through the door.

"Guys? Dustin? Mike? It's Christine. Anyone in there?"

No response.

Christine sagged, chewing on her tongue. If they weren't inside the AV room, they must be with everyone else. Besides a fire alarm, there was only one thing she could think of that would get everyone out of class like that. And seeing as a student's body had been found at the quarry yesterday, she was willing to bet 'assembly' was the winning answer.

She made her way to the gymnasium. The distorted bass of the crappy sound system was echoing down the hallway. Knowing she was on the right track, she picked up the pace.

"The school counselor will be available should any of you need to talk," the principal announced as she drew level with the doors. "But remember. Counselors aren't the only people to ask for help. Turn to your parents, your teachers, your peers. We can all help each other, and keep Will Byers in our hearts. Thank you."

Christine peeked through the window, but everyone was already getting up. The crowd stormed the doors, full of indifferent students who would rather be in class than pretend to care about Will. Christine had to scramble back against the opposite wall to avoid being flattened. She inspected the crowd, looking for Dustin's hat or Eleven's close-cropped hair. But none of the party was in sight.

"Christine?"

She whirled on the spot, and had to hide her disappointment when it wasn't one of the kids.

"Oh, uh—hey Mr. Clarke!"

"What are you doing here?" he asked. His pleasant surprise turned stern as he added, "Shouldn't you be in class?"

"Um…yeah, I know," she said, running a hand through her hair and inventing on the spot. "But with everything going on, you know, with Will I just…I just wanted to be there for the boys."

Mr. Clarke softened. He always did, at stuff like that. He was easily one of the most compassionate teachers at the middle school. It was what made him Christine's favorite.

"I understand," he said solemnly. "Still, skipping class…"

"My dad already knows. And…well, between you and me, Dustin's missed curfew a couple times this week. The boys were so sure they were gonna find Will. So, his mom asked me to keep an eye on him, make sure he doesn't run off."

"Well, that's good," he agreed. "I mean, the whole thing is horrible, but I'm glad the boys have someone on their side."

Christine smiled nervously. Kids were still rushing out of the gym, no nerds in sight. It was getting harder to hide her panic.

"You don't know where they are, do you?" she asked fervently.

"Oh! Um…well, I don't see…They were definitely here—I walked them down to the assembly a couple minutes late—but they could've slipped past us. I gave Michael the keys to the AV room, though, so that's probably where they're headed."

"Okay, great! Well, it was nice seeing…"

"Nonsense! I'll walk with you."

"Oh…okay…"

Mr. Clarke led the way through the sea of students. Christine was still scanning the crowd routinely, but couldn't find anyone she recognized. She was so focused she almost didn't notice when Mr. Clarke spoke.

"So how are things going up at the high school?"

"Hm? Oh, um…they're good. Normal. Mostly."

"You're still enjoying science?"

"Yeah! Yeah, I'm taking physics now. It's not chemistry, but I still like it."

Mr. Clarke smiled proudly. "A mind like yours, I'm sure Mr. Austin's class is no match."

"I don't know," Christine said airily, her mind drifting to a certain head of brunette hair. "Physics has its perks."

"You know, I remember watching you in biology. You were always staring out the window or—or disassembling your mechanical pencil. That's when I knew you needed a real challenge. I always knew we made the right call advancing you. One of the best decisions I've made as a teacher. Oh, and one of the hardest, mind you. But I'm proud of it. That, and pairing you with Barbara Holland for your first lab project."

Christine was glad that he couldn't see her miserable smile. "Yeah. I think that was a pretty good decision too."

Mr. Clarke continued to talk as they walked to the AV room, talking about their latest ham shack and what kind of students he had in his classes these days. Christine listened, interested but too tired to truly participate in the conversation. It was a relief when they got to the AV closet. He let her be with an enthusiastic farewell, and a promise to catch up when all the craziness had passed. He was just about to leave when he placed a gentle hand on her shoulder.

"I know things have been tough this week. But you're a smart kid, Chrissy. I don't think the boys could ask for a better mentor, or a better friend."

Christine had been too embarrassed to muster a response. Thankfully, her bashful smile seemed to be enough. With a pat on the back, Mr. Clarke headed back for his own classroom.

It was a few minutes before the boys caught up to her.

"Christine!"

Mike skid around the corner first, grinning and out of breath. Dustin and Lucas almost collided with his back. They were giggling as well, impervious to her stern glare.

"Yeah, it's me. What the *hell* is going on?"

"Aw man, it was sick," said Dustin jovially. "We were at the assembly right? And Troy was being an asshole about Will, laughing through

all of Principal Sherman's speech. And then Mike goes up to him, right? And he *shoves* him over like…!"

"Not at the assembly," Christine hissed. "I told you idiots to stay at the house! What are you even doing here? Someone could… Eleven?"

She almost hadn't recognized her. Standing nervously at the back of the group was a small girl with light blonde hair. She wore high tube socks and a vividly pink dress, which looked at odds with her blue windbreaker. Gone were the circles under her eyes, the pale skin that almost showed her veins. It looked like she was actually wearing makeup.

Christine narrowed her eyes at the dress.

"Where did you get that? That's not mine."

"It's Nancy's," Mike explained. "We had to go back to my house for the wig."

"You had to—You went back to your *house?* Mike! What if someone had seen her?"

"They didn't!" Lucas assured her. "We were super careful!"

"And it worked, didn't it?" asked Dustin. "Even you didn't notice!"

"Alright, *if* you were going to leave, why couldn't you just use my clothes?"

"Cause you didn't have a wig. Duh. Also cause Lucas was afraid to go in your closet."

Lucas promptly shoved Dustin into the wall.

Christine sighed, rubbing her hands down her face. These kids were easily going to be the death of her. But before she could get too stressed, Eleven walked up to her side. She pulled on the sleeve of Christine's flannel, and then pointed to her own hair.

"Same," she said with a soft smile. "Pretty."

The anger slipped out of her, which was very inconvenient.

"Yeah," said Christine with a smile. She poked El on the nose, making her jump. "You're very pretty, El."

Lucas elbowed Mike, who rolled his eyes. "Can we get on with this now?"

Mike unlocked the door to the AV room, and all five of them piled inside. Just like the hallway, the room seemed smaller than she remembered. There were more electronics piled on the shelves. Mr. Clarke was always acquiring new toys without throwing out the old ones. However, there was one toy that stood out from the rest.

"Holy shit!" Christine was unable to contain a gasp of delight as she saw the radio on the table. She pushed through the boys, ignoring their complaints as she plopped down into the chair. "Holy *shit*! You guys weren't kidding! This thing is huge! The signal alone—geez, this thing is a proper, international radio! And with technology like this? Shit, you could pick up walkies, pick up ham shacks, radios. Across oceans! You could hear anything!"

"Yeah," Mike said sourly. "That's kinda the point?"

"Come on, Chris," said Dustin, easing her out of the chair. "You can geek out over the Heathkit later."

Mike shook his head. "It's like working with little kids."

Eleven was ushered into the chair in front of the radio while Lucas locked the door. Then they all gathered around to watch.

"So how does this work?" asked Dustin. "Will doesn't even have his supercomm."

"It's not a manual connection," Christine explained. She leaned over the radio, powering it up and pulling El's hand to the tuner. "She navigates the stations herself. Like she's finding *Will's* frequency, not his radio."

She pulled a piece of paper out of her pocket, unfolding it to reveal another one of Will's missing posters. She laid it out in front of

Eleven, who looked nervous.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Christine asked.

Eleven nodded stubbornly. She closed her eyes, and began to focus on the radio.

Loud static filled the room. Just like last night, the sound was enough to put her on edge. Something about it sent a shiver up her spine. She couldn't tell if it was her anxiety, or some sixth sense that knew something unnatural was going on.

"She's doing it," said Mike in amazement. "She's finding him!"

"This is crazy," Dustin breathed.

"Calm down," Lucas scoffed. "She just closed her eyes."

On cue, the light over their head blew out. Everyone except Eleven jumped. Christine fixed the boys with a hard glare in the semi-darkness.

"Will the three of you shut up? She's trying to concentrate."

Dustin smacked Lucas on the shoulder. "Yeah, dude. She's trying to concentrate."

They quieted down to listen to the radio once more. It was definitely picking up something. There was a repetitive thud or—no, a *clang*. It sounded metallic, whatever it was. Too steady to be anything human, too slow to be much else.

Christine furrowed her brow. "What is that? Some kind of interference?"

She reached for the dial, only for Mike to grab her wrist.

"I don't think so. Listen."

It was quiet. Then a little louder, then a little more, like Eleven was honing in on the sound. In a matter of seconds, it had clarified to a whimper. That was unmistakably human.

"Mom?"

Just the boys' reaction was enough to confirm Christine's suspicions. Will's voice pleaded from the radio, the clanging getting louder around him.

"Mom! Please!"

"No way," said Lucas, and Christine shushed him again. But they were too frantic to listen to her.

Mike grabbed the microphone, repeatedly jamming his finger on the button. "Will!"

"Will, it's us! Are you there?"

"Can you here us? We're here!"

"Guys, stop," Christine ordered. "Stop!"

"No!" Lucas yelled. Will was still pleading on the radio. "Why can't he hear us?!"

"I don't know," Mike groaned. He jammed his finger on the buttons again. "Will?!"

"Guys, I don't think it works like that," Christine pleaded. "Will doesn't have his supercomm, remember? This isn't a real connection. There's nowhere for your voices to go."

The boys were ready to argue. But at that exact moment, the banging stopped. Will's voice faltered, and another sound swelled in the speakers. It was…something she couldn't place. Familiar in the way that crept up the back of your neck but didn't quite connect in her brain. The only thing she could think to describe it was clicking, but not in the way a machine would. It was the way an animal might, if it was blind or making a call of distress. She racked her brains, trying to think of an animal that fit, but fell short.

The clicking grew into a growl, then a roar, and the boys turned to look at her in fear.

"Chrissy?" Dustin asked weakly. "What is that?"

"I—I don't know…"

Will's voice was growing frantic.

"Mom! It's coming! It's—It's like home, but it's so dark! It's so dark and empty! And it's cold! Mom? Mom, please!"

The roar turned into a high pitched screech, and all four of them stumbled back from the radio. They responded just in time. A moment later, the entire Heathkit radio went up in flames. Sparks flew out in all directions, and a cloud of smoke encircled the room.

"Shit!" Christine cursed. She scrambled around the table, pulling the kids back. "Shit, get down! Dustin! Fire extinguisher!"

Dustin was already a step ahead of her. No sooner had the words left her mouth than a stream of white shot at the desk. It kept the flames at bay, but the smoke had already triggered the alarm. Christine resisted the urge to cover her ears. She dove over Eleven instead, as if her body might be able to block her from the harsh, loud noises.

"It's okay, El. It's gonna be…El?"

For the second time in a matter of minutes, Christine was too shocked to finish her sentence. She knew that Eleven's powers took a toll on her, but yesterday hadn't looked like this. Already, she could see the blood seeping from her nose, the dark veins crawling over her head. Yesterday they'd been purple. Now, they were a dark and alarming black.

"El!" Mike was trying to elbow Christine out of the way. "Are you okay?!"

He and Lucas both let out gasps of concern when they saw her. But Eleven was completely nonresponsive. Her eyes wouldn't focus on them, like part of her was still stuck someplace else.

"We need to get her out of here," Christine ordered. "Now. Go! Move!"

She swept Eleven up into her arms, and the entire party fled for the

door. The fire alarm was giving her anxiety, but it had its benefits. The whole school had been swept up into a frenzy. With everyone running up and down the hallway, no one looked twice at the nerds sprinting like they were being chased, or the random teenage girl carrying a sick child that didn't even go to their school.

They had a short argument when they reached bike rack. Christine was reluctant to let go of Eleven, but Mike insisted that his bike would be better to transport El. In the end, Christine relented and gently loaded Eleven on the back of his bike. She slumped heavily against his back and Mike had to steer with one hand, the other holding her arms tight around his waist. Christine rode close behind them, just in case.

The fact that they made it back to her house without any major calamities was a miracle itself.

Christine ushered everyone through the back door, leaving their bikes toppled and askew in the backyard. She swept Eleven back up into her arms and carried her to the bedroom. Then she darted back to the kitchen, grabbing the same supplies as the night before, and returning to take care of Eleven. This was very difficult with the three boys hovering around her. Mike wouldn't move away from the bed, and Dustin and Lucas seemed to be glued to Christine's sides. After several minutes urging him to *back up* so she could wash Eleven's face, Christine finally snapped.

"Out! All of you! Get out of my room!"

"But, Christine—!"

"Nope! Wait in the living room! You can check the windows, you can lock the doors, you can raid the kitchen, I don't care! Just get the hell out of my room!"

She had to shove them into the hallway, and slammed the door behind them.

It was easier after that. She cleaned Eleven's face and tried to get her to drink some water. The problem was, El was still in shock. Her arms hung like deadweight, and Christine couldn't even change her

out of the dress and into something more comfortable. The only time she got a response was when she tried to take off the blonde wig.

"No…"

Eleven couldn't lift and arm to stop her, but she whined as Christine pulled it from her head.

"I know," she whispered gently, running a hand over Eleven's natural hair. "But you'll sleep better like this. And you don't want to get blood on it, right?"

She whined again, looking longingly at the wig.

"How about this? I'll let you hold it, and you can keep it right here. This way if you want to put it on when you feel better, you can."

The offer was good enough that Eleven summoned the strength to take the wig from her, and hugged it to her chest. It broke Christine's heart in a way. This tiny girl had superpowers, but the thing she cared about at that moment was keeping the wig that made her feel pretty.

"I'm gonna go talk to the boys," Christine said, patting the blankets. "Will you be okay for a few minutes?"

Eleven nodded. Or she tried to, but she already appeared to be half asleep. Christine waited until she'd stopped moving, checked to make sure she was still breathing steadily, and then headed out to the living room.

"Is she okay?" Mike demanded as soon as he saw her.

"She's fine," Christine assured him. "I told you, it drains her. I think holding the connection for so long was risky, especially after she was pushing it last night."

She collapsed into the armchair, rubbing her temples. The boys were scattered throughout the room. Lucas was sitting on the couch, his head similarly in his hands. Dustin sat on the floor, his legs in front of him, his arms limp. His mouth was hanging open as he stared into space, like he was still trying to process everything that had

happened since that morning. And Mike, of course, was pacing around the room. Christine wasn't going to waste energy telling him to stop.

At a loss for anything else, she cleared her throat. "Lunch?"

There was no response. But what other choice did she have? So she dragged herself to the kitchen and started making sandwiches.

Christine wracked her memory for the next hour or so, but she couldn't think of a time the party had been this quiet for this long. She couldn't remember a time where just Dustin had been quiet for this long. It was unsettling. She didn't blame them, of course. Not after what they'd heard. But she couldn't figure out what to say. Any assurance that Will was fine would be sickeningly hollow. She wasn't prepared to make anyone believe that, not when she could still hear the unearthly clicking in her ears. And she knew the others must be hearing it too.

It wasn't until later, when the boys had picked apart their food, when Christine had tired of watching them pretend to eat, when she'd taken the plates back into the kitchen to wash, that someone finally spoke.

"Is this seriously all we're gonna do?" It was no surprise that Lucas asked. "We're just gonna sit here eating PB and J's while Will's somewhere out there being hunted?"

"We don't know that," tried Mike.

"Yes, we do! You heard it! I heard it! We all heard it!"

"What *was* it?" asked Dustin shakily.

"We know what it was. It was the Demogorgon!"

"You said the Demogorgon wasn't real!"

"Did that *thing* sound real to you? Cause it sure as shit didn't sound like anything I've heard before!"

"Okay, hold on," Christine interrupted. She threw her towel down on

the back of the couch, hoping she seemed more authoritative than tired. "One thing at a time, remember? We can't help Will until we know where he is."

"But we don't," said Lucas. "All of that, and we *still* don't know! I mean, what was even the point of this?"

"Because El was telling the truth," Mike said fervently. "We know she wasn't lying. We know Will's alive."

"Yeah, but for how long?" Dustin asked.

It sent a chill around the group, which Christine did her best to push out of the room.

"Focus. First thing's first. What did we learn from the radio?"

"Right," Mike agreed. He was pacing again. "What was Will saying? Like home…Like home…but dark?"

"And empty," Lucas added.

"Empty and cold," said Dustin. "…wait, did he say cold?"

"I don't know! The stupid radio kept going in and out."

"It's like riddles in the dark," Dustin sighed.

"He kept calling for his mom," Christine supplied.

Mike gave her a weird look. "What does that matter? He's scared. Of course he was calling for his mom."

"I don't know. It sounded more like he was talking to her. One half of a conversation."

"Okay," Lucas said slowly. "But Will's mom isn't missing."

Christine frowned. That was a point. If Will was…somewhere, and his mom wasn't, how was she talking to him too? Unless she'd also found a powerful superchild to help her contact "the other side." She wanted to ask, but she couldn't imagine how that conversation would

go. Was she just supposed to call up the Byers house and ask if Mrs. Byers had spoken to Will lately? She couldn't even tell her about Eleven. What if Christine was wrong, and she just pushed a grieving mother to the edge? What if Jonathan picked up the phone instead?

"Like home," Mike was still muttering. "Like his house?"

"Or maybe like Hawkins," said Lucas.

"Upside down."

Everyone turned to the hallway, where Eleven had reappeared. The circles under her eyes had faded a bit, but she still looked unsteady on her feet. Her wig was back in place, albeit slightly off center.

Christine would have rushed to her side, but Mike beat her to it. He grabbed her by the arm, helping her over to the couch so she could lie down. Lucas scooted out of her way, wrinkling his nose.

"What did she say?"

"Upside down," Mike repeated. "Upside down!"

"What?"

"When El showed us where Will was, she flipped over the board, remember? Upside down!"

"Wait, when was this?" Christine asked. "The board?"

"For our campaign. We were in my basement, and she said Will was hiding. Then she flipped the game board upside down. Dark, empty!"

"Do you understand what he's talking about?" Lucas asked Dustin, who shook his head.

"No."

"Guys, come on, just think about it," Mike complained. "When El took us to find Will, she took us to his house, right?"

"Yeah," Lucas said flatly. "And he wasn't there."

"But what if he was there? What if we just couldn't see him? What if he was on the other side?"

"Wait, the other side?" Christine asked, squinting. "Are we back to the ghost theory?"

Mike groaned. Without invitation, he grabbed one of the magazines off the coffee table. Then he went to Christine's card table and grabbed the sharpie she'd been using to do flashcards. Uncapping it, he began scribbling over the back of the magazine.

"Hey! I was reading that!"

"Shut up, it's just an add."

He scribbled until the whole thing was black, then tossed the marker aside. He tapped on the front of the magazine.

"Look, what if this is Hawkins, and this…" He flipped it around to show them the black side. "…is where Will is? The Upside Down."

"Like the Vale of Shadows," said Dustin, finally catching on.

"Beyond the veil?" Christine asked. "It still sounds like we're talking ghosts."

"No, not ghosts. Dungeons and Dragons."

Dustin held up a finger, running to his backpack. He pulled out a thick black binder, which he slammed on the coffee table next to the ruined magazine. Christine watched as he flipped through pages and pages, all adorned with pictures of large dragons, elves, and dark forests. Involuntarily, she raised an eyebrow.

"You carry your rulebook around with you?"

Dustin glared at her.

"Here," he said, when he'd found the correct page. "The Vale of Shadows is a dimension that is a dark reflection or echo of our world. It is a place of decay and death. A plane out of phase. A place of monsters. It is right next to you and you don't even see it."

There was a heavy beat as all four of them exchanged dark looks.

"An alternate dimension," Mike breathed into the silence.

"But…how…how do we get there?" Lucas asked.

Dustin checked the page. "You cast Shadow Walk."

"In real life, dummy."

"We can't shadow walk, but…maybe she can."

In unison, they all turned to look at Eleven. She was dozing on the couch, still half asleep, but her eyes were open.

"Do you know how we get there?" Mike asked, and somehow Christine was still surprised by the gentleness in his voice. "To the Upside Down?"

Eleven shook her head into the pillow.

Lucas groaned, but Christine shook her head.

"Forget about getting there. How do we even find it?"

"Well it's the Upside Down, right?" Dustin tapped the floor underneath him. "Hypothetically, you open a portal and there it is."

"Yeah, but what if you open the portal and get the wrong one?"

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"Well, we're talking about alternate dimensions, right? The multiverse?"

The boys blinked at her.

Resigned, Christine walked around to the coffee table. She kneeled next to Dustin and picked up the magazine.

"You're talking about the Upside Down like it's the only other possibility. But quantum physics suggests that if there's more than one dimension, then there's thousands of them. Infinite dimensions

stacked on top of each other. And because they each exist in a relative state, there's no definitive order to them. Kinda like this."

Christine held up the magazine. She showed them the front, then the back, then all the pages in between.

"So the front is Hawkins, the back is the Upside Down, and in between you have infinite possible alternate universes. And every time I open the magazine, the pages are moving around. I've got no way to know if I'm gonna open up on Hawkins version one, twenty, or seven million three hundred and sixty-seven."

"So how do we get to the Upside Down?" Lucas asked.

"I don't know," said Christine. "That's what I just asked."

"You don't know?" Dustin asked incredulously. "How can you know all of this and not know?"

"This is theory, Dustin! None of this shit has been proven until now. If Will's in another dimension, it's the first time in scientific history it's happened."

"Then guess! You're in physics, right?"

"I'm in high school physics! Not quantum physics, dumbass!"

"She's right," said Mike. He was looking warily at the magazine. "We need someone who knows more about this than we do. Someone who really knows their stuff."

"Mr. Clarke," Dustin answered almost instantly.

Lucas and Christine shot him the same disbelieving look.

"Really?" Lucas asked. "You wanna ask our science teacher how to open up a portal between infinite dimensions on the forefront of scientific research?"

"Yeah. Do you have a better idea?"

Lucas turned to Christine, who shook her head. Ideas were something

they were fresh out of.

"Okay," said Mike, slipping back into plan mode. "So we bike back to school and find Mr. Clarke. Then we can ask him…"

"No one is biking anywhere," said Christine.

"What? Why not?"

"Mike, we just set fire to the most expensive radio AV club has ever owned. Do you want to go back and face Mr. Clarke right now?"

There was a grumble as the boys agreed with her.

"Whatever you want to ask Mr. Clarke can wait until tomorrow."

"Shit," Dustin groaned. "Tomorrow!"

"What?"

"It's Will's funeral."

Christine sighed. "Alright. So we go to the funeral, and afterwards…"

"Why do we have to go to his funeral?" Lucas asked. "He's not dead, he's in trouble. We can't waste time going to his fake funeral."

"And you don't think it's gonna look weird if Will's three best friends don't show up?"

"Who cares if it looks weird?" asked Mike. "We'll just say we were grieving and it was too painful to go."

"No," Christine said again, putting her foot down. "Look, setting off the fire alarm today was bad enough. We're not supposed to be drawing any attention to ourselves, remember? Incognito. Eleven has to stay hidden."

"Then she can stay here with you," said Mike. "We'll go to the school, and…"

"Mike, you're not listening to me. You said there are people looking for Eleven, right? The bad men? And that they have insane resources

that could probably monitor even an anonymous tip to the police station and get her caught?"

"Yeah, so?"

"*So*, don't you think they'd be monitoring this whole town for weird things? Will is the only kid to go missing in this town for probably like a century. And if the three of you don't keep up appearances there, it's gonna qualify as a *really* weird thing. We go to the funeral, and deal with Mr. Clarke after. He'll probably be there anyway."

"What about Eleven?" Mike asked. "She can't come with us."

"She'll be fine here by herself. The funeral will be an hour, tops." Mike made to argue, but Christine held up a hand. "I will come directly back here, Michael. There's no adults, she won't go near the windows, and no one will see her. It will be okay."

Mike turned to the other three kids. Again, they were out of ideas and options. Lucas and Dustin merely shrugged. Eleven just followed the conversation with wide eyes and no input. Finally, after staring at her for several seconds, Mike sighed.

"Don't call me Michael," he grumbled. "What are you, my mom?"

As the planning continued on, Christine couldn't help but think that she certainly felt like it.

14. Science Experiments

Will Byers' funeral was a subdued affair. For someone who was so often picked on, there was quite the turn out. Hawkins Middle School had adjusted their schedule to a half-day to give students and teachers time to pay their respects. Mr. Clarke was in attendance, along with about half the students in his class. Half of them weren't even dragged by their parents.

The high school hadn't closed, of course. But that didn't stop most from skipping, swearing that they needed time to grieve. Somehow they must've gotten lost on their way to the cemetery. The only teenagers standing around Will's grave were Jonathan, Nancy and Christine.

Christine was doing her best to keep her distance from Nancy, but it was difficult with Dustin and Mike standing next to each other. The only thing separating her from her friend was Claudia Henderson, who'd been kind enough to stand on Christine's right and was oblivious to the tension passing over her head. Christine and Nancy only made eye contact once. Christine was thankful for their silent understanding. Nothing they had to say to each other would be said here. It wasn't the time or place for the petty arguments they were clinging onto.

As soon as the service was over, Nancy walked off with her parents. She didn't give Christine a second glance.

Christine knew that she had a limited time window, but her conversation with the boys the day before was still nagging at her. She jumped on the line that was feeding past Mr. and Mrs. Byers. It seemed like Mr. Byers was doing most of the talking, shaking hands and accepting condolences. Mrs. Byers had her arms wrapped around her torso, just staring out into space. Everyone was giving her a wide berth, either out of respect or their own reservations. What did you even say to a woman who had lost her son?

She'd been so caught up wondering that she didn't prepare anything to say. Before she knew it, she was shaking hands with Will's dad, then standing in front of Mrs. Byers. She hadn't even noticed that

Jonathan was there too. She wasn't sure which one of them was more surprised.

"Hi," Christine said lamely. "Uh…"

There were so many questions she wanted to ask. There were so many assurances she wanted to give. But what if she was wrong? What if Will hadn't been talking to his mom? Or he had, but it had been a mom from a different dimension? What if after everything, all her proof, they couldn't get Will back anyhow? What if she failed, and Will was lost all over again? What good was reassurance then?

Jonathan and his mother were both staring at her.

"Um…I just wanted to say that I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry for your loss."

"Thank you," Mrs. Byers managed, nodding weakly.

"Will…he's a really…he was a really smart kid. And I know how much his friends love him, and how much they want him back. So if you need anything…um…I guess just—just let me know."

She was realizing rapidly that this was a terrible idea. She couldn't even look Will's mother in the eye, not with everything she knew. She should have gone straight home to Eleven. That was the best thing she could have done for Will.

Mrs. Byers was squinting at her thoughtfully.

"Sorry, you're…You babysit Dustin, right? Chelsea…?"

"Christine," she and Jonathan corrected at the same time. Mrs. Byers mumbled an apology, which Christine waved off. "And Dustin and I are just friends. He uh…he hates it when I say babysitter."

Mrs. Byers smiled as warmly as she could have, nodding fervently. "No, I know. I know. Will used to be the same way with Jonathan. He always said he was too old for a babysitter, that…that he didn't n-need anyone to watch him…"

Christine panicked as the woman's voice broke. Thankfully, Jonathan

stepped in.

"Hey, Christine, thanks. For the flowers."

He nodded to one of the wreaths near Will's pristine new headstone. Hers stuck out amongst the roses and the white lilies, a rainbow of assorted flowers from yellow daisies to blue hydrangeas to purple pansies. Christine smiled.

"Oh, yeah. My dad ordered them from Atlanta, but I helped him pick them out. We thought the service might need some…I don't know. Color."

She felt awkward saying it. The thought sounded so bad out loud. But Mrs. Byers smiled again.

"He would like those," she said confidently. "The colors. Just—Just like his crayons. Thank you, Christine. Really. Thank you."

She patted Christine on the arm. It was a brief motion, and she quickly wrapped her arms around her torso again. Like if she let go for too long her whole chest might fall apart. Jonathan stepped up to her side, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. He nodded to Christine too, half gratitude and half dismissal.

Mortified but also relieved, Christine broke off from the crowd. She made for her bike, parked by the road next to the Hendersons' car. Claudia rolled down her window to speak.

"Are you sure you don't want to come to the reception, Christine?" she asked. "You can ride with us if you'd like."

"No, I'm okay." Christine clambered onto her bicycle. Her black dress was making it harder than usual. "I think I just…I want to call my dad. Talk to him for a while."

Claudia laid a hand on her chest. "Oh! Alright, sweetheart. Take your time. But check in with me later, won't you? I worry about you over there."

"I will, Claudia. Thanks."

Mr. Henderson started the car, and Christine caught Dustin's eye in the back seat. He gave her a thumbs up, looking much too chipper to be leaving a funeral. Christine suppressed an eye roll, and gave him a salute. Plan in motion.

It wasn't much of a plan, she reflected as she biked back to her house. As far as she knew, the boys hadn't figured out what they were going to say to Mr. Clarke, or how they were going to covertly get information about navigating different dimensions. The plan started with "attend the reception" and ended with "talk to Mr. Clarke."

At least Christine's part of the plan was easy. All she had to do was go home and hang out with Eleven.

Christine parked her bike behind the house, then jogged up the back stairs. She knocked twice on the back door, then three times in quick succession. It swung open almost immediately. Eleven had clearly been waiting in the hallway for her.

Despite all of Christine's coaxing, El hadn't wanted to change since her makeover. She was still wearing the dated pink dress, and had grown protective over her blonde wig. Christine hadn't even been able to get her to swap her green and yellow striped tube socks.

"Late," Eleven scolded as Christine locked the door behind her.

"Sorry. I stopped for snacks. Or do you not want these?"

She reached into the grocery bag hanging from her arm, and unearthed the box of Eggos she'd gotten from the store. Eleven's glare vanished, though she was still pouting grumpily. Without words, it clearly read: *"Fine. You're off the hook. For now."*

Christine grinned, and nodded down the hall. "Come on. You put on the music, and I'll put on your waffles."

The Stranger was playing again when she brought the plates into the living room. Eleven had resumed her place in front of the radio, watching the wheels of the cassette go round with fascinated attention. She swayed back and forth, and Christine smiled.

"You know, you don't have to put this on just cause I like it. There are

like a hundred cassettes there. My favorite doesn't have to be yours."

El turned to give her a curious look, which was instantly swept away by the waffles. She scrambled over to the couch, taking a seat at the table Christine had set up for her. Her brown eyes sparkled as they landed on the plate with four waffles, twice as high as Christine's. She snatched the top off the stack. It was already half gone when Christine returned from the kitchen.

"Okay, I know you probably just want to scarf them down plain. *But* just in case you change your mind, I've brought you some additional options."

Christine laid out the syrup, powdered sugar and whipped cream on her table. It was incredibly amusing to watch Eleven stare each of them down. She counted the toppings, then counted the waffles on her plate. Three toppings. Three and a half waffles. Her nose was already scrunched in distaste, but she surprised Christine with a tentative nod.

"Wow. Alright, let's try a little adventure."

Christine held up the syrup. She popped the cap and squeezed a small pool onto her own plate. Then she held up her waffle and dipped it into the liquid. Warily, Eleven copied her motions. The syrup she poured onto her plate could barely qualify as a drizzle, but she managed to get some onto the waffle. She took the tiniest nibble. Her nose wrinkled again, and she shook her head wildly.

"No."

"Really? Why not?"

"Sweet. Too sweet."

"It's *too sweet?* You're a kid. You're supposed to love sweet things and rot your teeth out."

Eleven pointedly wiped the rest of the syrup off her plate with a napkin, and Christine sighed.

"Okay. Your loss."

Next they tried the powdered sugar. Christine tapped the shaker over her waffle. Eleven liked the way the sugar fell, and analyzed the patterns inside the little square divots, but she was reluctant to try it on her own. Shaking it over the top meant sacrificing an entire waffle to the experiment.

"Come on," Christine coaxed. "Just try it."

She took a bite out of her own, so overzealous that the waffle tipped and hit her in the nose. The powdered sugar promptly covered her face, and Eleven burst in to giggles. Christine did her best to wipe it off, shooting Eleven a mischievous smirk.

"Yeah, yeah. Laugh it up."

She reached over and wiped the powder on El's nose. The girl recoiled, but was still smiling as she wiped it away. It looked more like she was worried about getting her dress dirty than getting the sugar on her face. She was more careful than Christine when she bit into her waffle, making sure to lean out over her plate. She successfully avoided hitting herself in the face, but didn't seem to care much for the taste. Her response amounted to a halfhearted shrug as she licked the sugar off her fingers.

"Fine," Christine sighed dramatically. "One more, and I will let you eat your plain, boring waffles in peace."

If she'd thought El was fascinated by the powdered sugar, it was nothing compared to her reaction to whipped cream. Her eyes nearly bugged from her head as she watched the cream blossom from the can. Christine proudly scooped it up onto her waffle, taking a victorious bite. It didn't really matter. Eleven was still staring transfixed at the plate.

"Pretty cool, huh? Here. Gimme your finger."

Eleven was hesitant, but held up one finger at her request. Christine gently maneuvered her wrist, flipping it so her fingertip was out, then squirted some whipped cream into her hand. El jumped at the cold contact.

"And then we eat it," said Christine, spraying some onto her own hand. "See?"

She stuck her finger in her mouth, licking off the cream and motioning for Eleven to do the same. Her eyes stayed wide as she considered the flavor and, a moment later, she held out her finger for more.

"Ha ha," Christine chuckled triumphantly. "Gotcha."

She gave Eleven some more whipped cream, then handed her the whole canister. She had to talk her through how to operate the nozzle, which kept taking her by surprise every time she used it. Christine thought it was a mistake the first two times she ended up with whipped cream on the entire waffle. By third, she realized Eleven must've been doing it on purpose. It was an alarming amount of sugar, but Christine made no move to stop her. She was a deprived kid, after all. She had every right to rot her teeth out. She just hoped it wouldn't result in some crazy, superpower-driven sugar high that would take her house down.

"What is favorite?" Eleven asked, after she had devoured every crumb of the waffles.

"Hm. I guess it just means like you like something, more than you like anything else. Like the waffle toppings." Christine pointed to the bottles on the table in turn. "You didn't like the syrup. You thought the sugar was okay. You *really* liked the whipped cream. So that one's your favorite. But *my* favorite is this one."

She grabbed the syrup, and poured it over what was left of her waffles.

El was still watching her curiously. "So favorite…is for food?"

"It can be for anything. You've worn a lot of different clothes now, right? Mike's sweatshirt, my T-shirt. But if I had to guess, I'd say this dress is your favorite. Or music. I listen to a lot of different music, but this album's my favorite. And after you listen to a lot of music, you'll find your favorite too."

"I understand," said Eleven, nodding to herself.

Christine stacked up their plates, and did her best to contain a smirk.

"You know, sometimes we have favorite people too. The people we like best, who are the most important to us. Do *you* have a favorite person, Eleven?"

Eleven's eyes went as wide as they had when she saw the whipped cream. In a panic, she shook her head. She had to grab at the wig as it almost slid out of place. Christine probably should have worked harder to contain her giggles.

"Woah! Hey, it's okay. I'm just teasing you, see?" She stuck out her tongue, and Eleven relaxed slightly. Still, Christine smirked. "It's fine. Anyway, I know it's Mike."

El blushed, and quickly hid her face behind her blonde hair.

"You don't have to be embarrassed. I think you're probably Mike's favorite person too. In fact, I know you are."

"Who is yours?"

Christine was taken aback. But El was looking up at her, sporting a very small smirk of her own. It didn't even waver as Christine laughed in disbelief.

"Alright, you wanna see my favorite person? Hold on."

She patted the couch, and quickly got up to go to her room. When she returned, it was with her yearbook in hand. She plopped down next to Eleven, motioning for her to scoot closer. Then she opened the book and began thumbing through the pages.

"E, F, G, and…there he is."

Steve Harrington was the center of everything he was a part of. His grade, the basketball team, even his own yearbook page. He smiled out at them with a perfect smile, his hair fluffy and gorgeous and his eyes shining. Christine noticed with a jolt that he was wearing the same green sweater he had at the party. It was criminal how good it

looked on him.

Eleven ran her fingers over the page, scrutinizing his photo. "Pretty?"

"Uh, yeah. I guess. Pretty hot."

"…hot?"

Christine winced, unable to meet Eleven's inquisitive gaze. "Yeah, it just means uh…it's like pretty, but usually when a guy…I think… yeah, I'll just…explain that some other time."

She wasn't sure Eleven even noticed her reluctance. She was too interested in the yearbook. With curious hands, she pulled the book closer. She flipped through the pages on her own, running her fingers over the pages each time. Cheerleaders, football games, science fairs, faculty. All of it she took in with the same captivation. Christine wasn't even sure she was looking for anything until she stopped.

"Chrissy."

Eleven tapped on the old picture of Christine. She'd tried to blow her hair out into big banana curls, which had already fallen out by the time they'd gone to the gymnasium for their photos. She was grinning painfully, one of her dad's flannels draped over her T-shirt.

"Ugh," Christine winced with a dry laugh. "That is *not* a good picture of me. Forgot how much I hated that one."

"Pretty," Eleven assured her, almost sounding concerned.

"Well, thank you. But 'pretty' is probably just Nancy. See?" Christine pointed the next row down at Nancy's perfect headshot. "Her mom always does her hair on picture day, and she's a lot better with makeup than I am. She…always looks great."

"Pretty too," Eleven agreed. She rubbed the image of Nancy's pink cardigan longingly, then looked up to Christine again. "Barb?"

"Sure, uh…here."

They flipped back a few pages until Christine could locate Barb's

picture. She knew Barb hated it as much as she disliked her own. But she didn't harp on it like Christine did. She'd just shrugged and thrown the pictures into her bag.

"Ugh, remind me not to wear red next year. That's another one for the books."

And that had been the end of it.

"Pretty?" Eleven asked from Christine's side.

"Yeah. Maybe not to most, but…Barb was pretty. Inside and out."

"Pretty…inside?"

"Yeah. She was a good person. She was funny, caring, loyal to a fault. Barb was…*is* one of my best friends."

Eleven frowned, her fingers stilling over the picture. "Sorry."

"You don't have to be," Christine assured her. "Wherever she is, it's not your fault."

"Really sorry."

Together they stared down at Barb's picture, the freckles and pink cheeks behind her big glasses. Christine hated this. She hated not knowing where Barb was. She hated that she'd been so wrapped up in the rest of the drama that she hadn't even noticed she was missing. She hated that people were already feeling sorry for her. That she was already beginning to think of Barb in the past tense. But Barb had to be out there. If Will could be alive, so could she. Barb was the smartest, most grounded person she knew. If anyone was practical enough to survive the jump to another dimension, it was her.

Christine sniffled away the tears that had welled in her eyes.

"You know, it's kinda messed up that your dad taught you what the word 'pretty' meant, but not how to tell time. How about we work on that, huh?"

They passed the next hour or so looking at clocks, Christine pointing

out the minute and hour hands while Eleven practiced counting by fives. It wasn't long before the boys arrived. There were no neatly parked bikes, or secret knocks. Just three blurs of dress shirts and ties flying past her windows and then pounding on the back door. Christine wrenched it open before Mike could manage a dent.

"Does the word 'incognito' mean anything to you?"

"We talked to Mr. Clarke!"

It was all the answer she got before the boys pushed past her, darting into the living room. She suppressed a groan as she shut the back door and locked it once more. By the time she'd followed them into the house, Mike was already pacing, Lucas slinging his tie across the back of the armchair, and Dustin spraying whipped cream into his mouth.

"Just make yourself at home," Christine grumbled. She kicked Dustin out of his seat and reclaimed her place on the couch.

"So we talked to Mr. Clarke," Mike repeated excitedly. "And we asked him about the Upside Down."

"Were you at least subtle?" asked Christine.

"Totally," Lucas assured her with a wink. "We told him it was all hypothetical."

Christine didn't bother pointing out that everything was hypothetical when discussing theoretical physics. Mike was already rushing on.

"So at first, he was talking about all the different parallel universes—like you were talking about with the magazine, Chrissy. And he thought we were asking because we wanted closure or whatever. To know that Will was okay in another universe. So then we had to tell him that *wasn't* what we were talking about, and that we meant a shadow world like the Upside Down."

"Did you know that Mr. Clarke plays D&D?" Dustin interjected. "I asked him if he knew what the Vale of Shadows was, and he just started spitting textbook definitions at me. It was awesome."

"Anyway," Mike continued firmly, "then we asked him how we would travel there, and he said that we couldn't because we were a tightrope walker, and if we wanted to travel between dimensions, we needed to be the flea."

Christine and Eleven both blinked at him. Mike groaned, picking up the discarded marker from the day before. He flipped through the same magazine until he found an article that was mostly text space, and began to draw.

"So he said that our world is like a tightrope, because there's only certain ways you can move. We've got three dimensions here, and that's it, right? But because a flea is built different than a human, they can go underneath the rope and it's still like walking right side up. So it's like the fourth dimension."

"Okay," Christine said slowly. "So in this situation, El is the flea?"

"We don't know. Just because she can see the other side doesn't mean she's been there."

"Have you been there?" Lucas asked.

Eleven did not answer, only shifted closer to Christine's side.

"It doesn't matter," said Mike, "because we know Will isn't a flea. So if he's in the Upside Down, there's got to be a way for regular humans to get through too. Now Mr. Clarke said that it was almost impossible, but…"

"Theoretically," Lucas added.

"…you could tear through time and space to push the dimensions together."

Mike ripped the page out of the magazine and folded it along the tightrope line. Then he took the end of the marker and stabbed through the paper. It crinkled and ripped, nearly tearing in half. Eleven shrunk closer to Christine, who frowned at the paper.

"Okay. I still don't know how that helps us navigate the infinite space between infinite dimensions."

"It doesn't," admitted Lucas. "But if the door's already been open, we don't have to. Right?"

"If it is still open, I guess…" Christine reached forward, taking the magazine page from Mike and turning it over in her hands. "If you weren't looking to open a door to someplace specific, if the only goal was to reach the fourth dimension, then that's fine. But once the gate closed all the way, I don't know how you'd get it to open to the same place again. So the only chance we'd have is finding exactly where and how Will went through."

"How do we do that?" asked Lucas.

"Triangulate people who've gone missing maybe? All we know for now is that it's somewhere around Mirkwood. Maybe Steve's house, if Barb…"

The sentence went unfinished. Christine had never been more grateful for Mike than when he eased the paper out of her hands. He gave her a very small, but very brave smile, and turned to plead to Eleven.

"It would take a lot of energy to build a gate like this. But that's gotta be what happened. Otherwise, how'd Will get there, right?"

"R-Right," Eleven stammered.

"What we wanna know is," Lucas began, "do you know where the gate is?"

Eleven nervously shook her head.

"Then how do you know about the Upside Down?" he demanded.

"Hey, chill, Lucas," Christine soothed. "It's like Mike said. Maybe she can see the bottom of the rope, but not go there. Like…I don't know. A tightrope walker with a mirror or something."

"A mirror for *what*?"

"So she can see under the rope."

"Why would a tightrope walker need to look under the rope?"

"I don't know, Lucas! It's a damn metaphor! Work with me here!"

"Dustin?"

Mike's voice interrupted their argument, and everyone turned around. Dustin had abandoned with whipped cream and was standing in the front hall spinning on the spot. He was looking at something in his hand, and every few seconds, he would start spinning the other way.

"What are you doing?" Mike asked. "Dustin?"

"Dustin!" Christine's voice snapped him to attention, and he wobbled on the spot as he looked up. "Care to share with the class?"

"Do you have a compass?"

"…do I have what?"

"A compass! I need all of your compasses, right now!"

"Why would we have…?"

But Mike and Lucas were running to their bags. Mike pulled out two, Lucas three, and they put them on the table that had previously held Christine and Eleven's waffles. Christine had to dive to stop Dustin from swiping the plates onto the floor.

"Dude," she scolded, but he just looked at her expectantly.

"Well? Where's yours?"

"My compass? I don't know, Dustin. I don't think we have one."

"You don't have a compass?" Mike asked, as if he'd been asking about a refrigerator.

"No, Michael, I don't have a compass. When the hell would I use it? If I need to get somewhere, I use a map."

All three of the boys exchanged incredulous looks. Dustin finally held

up his hands.

"Okay, we need to have a serious talk about your party survival kit, Christine, but it'll have to wait."

"Why? What are we looking at?"

"The compasses," said Dustin, placing his own among the pile. "They're facing North, right?"

"Yeah, so?" asked Lucas, who seemed supremely disinterested.

"Well, that's not true North."

"What do you mean?" asked Mike.

"I mean exactly what I just said," said Dustin emphatically. "That's not true North."

"Oh my God…" Christine gaped down at the table, checking the compass needles. "Dustin…Dustin, you're a genius!"

"Why is he a genius?" Lucas complained. "What do you see?"

"Are you both seriously this dense?" Dustin complained. He jabbed a finger out the window. "The sun rises in the East, and it sets in the West, right? Which means *that's* true North."

"So what you're saying is the compasses are broken," Mike finished.

Christine and Dustin rolled their eyes in unison.

"What? All six of them?" she asked.

"Come on, dude," Dustin added. "Do you even understand how a compass works? Do you see a battery pack on this?"

"No…"

"No, because it doesn't need one!"

"Then why is it broken?" Lucas insisted.

"It's not broken," said Christine. "It's being influenced."

She held up a finger, running through the kitchen to get to the garage.

Most garages were full of toolkits and auto parts, and boxes upon boxes of heirlooms and junk. In the Walcott's garage, there wasn't much to see. They'd moved too much when she was young to accumulate unnecessary stuff. There was a neat row of boxes against one wall, and a light stain on the floor where her dad's car was sometimes parked. On the opposite wall was a pristine work station of screwdrivers and handsaws. Her father had only used it a handful of times since they moved it, but he said it made him feel more secure. More often, Christine was using it to run science experiments for the school fair, or tinker with her radio to get a wider array of channels.

She grabbed a meter stick off the back wall and a magnet from one of the drawers, then darted back inside.

"Dustin, compass," she ordered, slamming her supplies onto the dining room table.

All four of the kids hurried into the room. Dustin slid his compass across the table, which Christine caught and placed in the middle of the meter stick.

"So compasses function based on the natural magnetic field of the Earth. When they're built, the needle is manufactured with a charge that allows one side to be attracted to the magnetic North."

"True North," Dustin added gleefully.

"*But* a compass can be affected if additional magnetic fields are introduced to the environment. Get big enough, strong enough, or close enough, and the measurement will have an increasing margin of error."

She tapped the compass face, then slowly began to slide the magnet along the meter stick. As they watched, the red point of the needle tremored and swiveled toward her approaching hand. The closer she

got, the more it turned, until it had completed an even ninety degree turn.

"See?" Dustin exclaimed. "In the presence of a more powerful magnetic field, the needle deflects to that power!"

"How did you even learn this?" Lucas asked.

"Physics lab," Christine said with a shrug.

"Library book," Dustin answered, "but that's not important. Remember what Mr. Clarke said? If there was a gate, it would have so much power…"

"It could disrupt the electromagnetic field," Mike finished breathlessly. "That's genius."

"Wait," said Lucas. "You mean that if we follow the compasses' North…?"

"They should lead us to the gate," Dustin affirmed.

Christine sank into one of the chairs, staring down at the compass. She couldn't help the expression of grave horror that snuck up on her face.

"What is it?" Mike asked nervously. "This is good, right? Now we can find Will."

"Yeah, we can," she agreed. "I'm just…I guess it's starting to sink in how…colossally in over our heads we are. I mean…a magnet that can affect compasses like this…I mean, that's a hundred and seventy-degree error…that's a *massive* field…"

"One big magnet," Dustin agreed darkly.

"Well—Well obviously, right? So what?" Mike's voice shook despite his words of optimism. "It's a tear in time and space, of course it's gonna be big. But we still need to find Will. We have to get him back to the gate."

"We need to bring him home," said Lucas assuredly.

Dustin still looked hesitant. "So…what do we do?"

There were several seconds of silence. It took a few more before Christine realized everyone was looking at her. She'd expected Mike to slam his hands on the table and start handing out orders, or Lucas to argue with Dustin that there were no questions while Will was in danger. But all four kids were looking to her now, each as apprehensive as the next.

Christine didn't want to march them into a tear in time and space. But they couldn't talk to any adults, and they couldn't talk to the cops. Even if they weren't hunting Eleven, who would believe them? They were five kids rambling about alternate dimensions, and time was of the essence.

They were in over their heads. But as Christine remembered Mrs. Byers' broken voice from that morning, her only option became clear.

"Well first you're all going home to change. I'm not taking you on a hike to find an interdimensional portal while you're in dress pants and ties."

15. Train Tracks

If Christine lived through this, she was seriously considering trying out for cross country. She'd gotten enough training in, that was for sure, with all the aimless wandering around Hawkins. She was so tired, she wasn't even sure if she was tired anymore.

After their doomsday meeting, the party had split up to change and grab supplies. What the boys had told their mothers, she had no idea. If they'd even told them anything before sneaking out. Christine had taken the Dustin route of preparation. She just filled a backpack with a few water bottles and granola bars in case they needed to hike through dinner. Also a hammer from the garage, just in case. She'd changed into pants, made sure to wear her boots this time instead of her tennis shoes, and put on a warmer sweatshirt. Despite her best efforts, Eleven still refused to change out of her pretty pink dress.

Once they'd reconvened, they set out for Mirkwood again. They'd learned their lesson from last time. Not enough not to go, of course, but enough to go without their bikes. It would take them longer to get there, but save them time in the long run. They'd spent so much energy slipping and sliding on their last hike, untangling their wheels and handlebars from brambles. And it wasn't like they could ride their bikes through the trees anyway.

"Besides," Dustin had pointed out at Lucas's impatient groaning, "we're going to find an interdimensional portal with massive electromagnetic force. Bikes are metal, dude. Get them close enough to a magnetic wormhole and—*whoosh!* Bye-bye bicycle."

"Just shut the hell up and walk," Lucas had grumbled.

The two of them had taken the lead as navigators. They kept their compasses out in front of them, cross checking occasionally to make sure they were still heading in the correct direction. Mike and Eleven trailed behind them, and Christine stayed at the back, unable to contribute much after her magnet presentation.

There was less chit chat today than there had been the first time around. Christine couldn't be sure if that was because everyone was

more tired or more nervous. She certainly was the latter. It was a supposed portal to another dimension—a realm of monsters and death for crying out loud. And they were armed with, what? A super-powered twelve-year-old and a hammer? She was sincerely regretting not grabbing her father's shotgun instead.

Christine wasn't sure where they were headed, or what they'd actually be able to do when they got there. For now, the only thing keeping her sane was doing a head count every sixty seconds.

One kid, two kids, three kids, four kids. One, two, three, four. One, two, three four.

From Mirkwood, they trekked through the woods, drifting deeper than they had last time. They were all on high alert, waiting for another twig to snap, for the low, growling, clicking sound to advance on them from the shadows of the trees. But nothing happened.

The trees stayed close together, until the five of them were spilling out onto a set of train tracks that wound through the forest. Christine had been dead set against it. She was *not* going to let them get distracted on the tracks and send five more bodies to the Hawkins Mortuary. But Dustin had assured her that the Hawkins Railway had been shut since for about fifty years. There hadn't been a train on these tracks since FDR was president. After several minutes of the boys calling her chicken, Christine had relented. Only because it was easier to walk on the tracks than through thorn bushes.

Christine had actively not worn a watch. She did not want to look down and despair about how long they'd walked without finding anything. She did not want to look down and realize it had been twenty minutes when it felt like four hours. And telling the boys it was getting late was not going to make them turn around. So what was the point?

At some point, after what felt like a very long time, Eleven stopped walking.

"Hey," Christine said, suddenly on high alert. "You okay, El?"

Eleven shook her head, but Mike sighed beside her. "She said she's tired."

"Yeah, join the club."

Christine huffed, watching Dustin and Lucas's backs grow smaller as they forged ahead. There was no stopping them. That was for sure. So she looked down on Eleven with a weary smile.

"You want a piggyback ride?"

"A…what?"

"Come on." She passed her backpack to Mike. Then she kneeled down, helping Eleven put her arms around her neck and hoisting her up onto her back. "Oof! Okay. See? I can't carry the magnetic force field of the Earth, but I can carry you."

Mike snorted next to her. "Wow. That was bad."

"Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it."

They started off down the tracks again. Every now and then, Christine had to hoist Eleven a little higher, making her squeal. Christine would ask if she was alright. Eleven would sniffle, wipe her face, and nod into her shoulder. It was so cold, Christine thought nothing of it.

"Hey, Chrissy?" Mike asked as they walked on. "Thanks for coming with us."

"Of course. Mike, I know how important this is. And I wouldn't want you guys out here alone."

He nodded, his eyes trained on the ground. "That was pretty cool what you did before with the magnet. It really helped that you knew that."

"I guess," said Christine. "But Dustin knew what he was talking about. I'm sure he would have gotten you guys there eventually."

"Maybe. But you also helped hide Eleven, and made us all listen when

we didn't believe you about her powers. So thanks."

"Um…you're welcome," she said, unable to mask her surprise. "Thanks for…saying thanks, I guess."

Mike nodded at the dirt. It looked like he still had more to say, but being genuine was apparently very hard for him. Christine did her best not to push him.

"I'm sorry, too. I know that I keep calling you annoying, and telling you that we don't need your help. But the truth is…it's kind of nice to have someone to talk to about crazy stuff like this. You know, someone older. Someone outside of the party."

"Ouch," Christine said with a smirk. "We're hunting down a portal to another dimension and I'm still not part of the party?"

That made him smile.

"We'll discuss it. I'll let you know when the party decides."

"No rush. We're just trying to travel out of the earthly plane and into the shadow realm to rescue Will from the Demogorgon. Just let me know by Sunday so I can be ready for the next campaign."

"Remember when you first moved here?" he asked. "You were helping Nancy with some dumb English project while Lucas, Will and I were planning in the basement."

"Ugh, I *do* remember that project. It was on *Huckleberry Finn*. I *hated* that book. I was so glad when you guys started screaming and broke up our study session."

"We weren't screaming. It was a battle cry. We were going to war to save the Paakliah people from the wrath of their warlock overlord."

"Right," said Christine, rolling her eyes. "Well from upstairs it just sounded like a bunch of screaming. Nancy dropped everything because she thought one of you had broken a leg or something."

"You guys were pretty cool about it," Mike said appreciatively. "I really thought Nancy was gonna kick us out to the backyard, but you

just picked up a tube of wrapping paper and started sword fighting with Lucas. He had no idea what to do. It was awesome!"

"Well, you can't wage a war without a pair of warlock bodyguards to duel. So you're welcome. And—God, Nancy was mortified at first. She really thought I was gonna take one look at you guys and bolt, make her do the rest of the project by herself. That feels like so long ago."

Christine chuckled at the memory. They all seemed too small, even her and Nancy. She'd still been in middle school then, the boys in elementary school. All of them had been wild and energetic, for the most part carefree. She shuddered to think how she'd swapped a tube of wrapping paper for a hammer.

"Are you still not talking to Nancy?"

"Yeah. I mean—…" The question took her off guard, and she glared at Mike affronted. "No. I'm…Why do you know that I'm not talking to Nancy?"

"I heard her talking to my mom about it," he said with a shrug. "She said you guys had a fight and she was mad at you, and then she did something stupid so you were even more mad at her. She was crying and everything. She told Mom she was really scared, and then that you guys were blaming each other for Barb going missing."

"Great. Well…just do me a favor and unhear all of that, okay?"

"It's stupid," he said, glaring at her. "You know it's not Nancy's fault if Barb's gone. And it's not yours either. If she's gone like Will is, then we can get her back."

"It's not that simple, Mike," Christine groaned. "Nancy and I have both done a lot of stupid stuff lately."

"Because you both like Steve Harrington?"

"Just shut up and walk, Mike."

"Fine. But it's dumb that you guys are fighting over some lame douchebag. There's way more important things happening. Like, life or death things. And Nancy really misses you. Plus, she's way less

annoying when you're being friends. Fighting's making her cranky."

He hiked Christine's backpack up onto his shoulders and marched ahead. Christine tried to grumble her curse words quiet enough that Eleven couldn't hear, and stomped on after him.

The train tracks curved to brush along the edge of the woods, and the five of them walked out into a clearing. It was some kind of junk yard. Abandoned cars and rusty barrels were strewn across the field. Even an old transport bus sat on the edge of the hill. It would have been a killer place for parties, but there wasn't a single red Solo cup on the ground. They must have been too far out for even rebellious teens to walk.

Dustin came to a stop in front of the group, looking around in confusion. "Oh, no."

"Oh no?" Lucas repeated in annoyance. "What's oh no?"

"We're headed back home."

"What?!"

"Are you sure?" asked Mike.

"Yeah, I'm sure. Setting sun right there. We looped back around."

"Oh, for the love of God," Christine sighed. She set Eleven back on the ground, stretching her aching arms. "It's the sun, Dustin! How are we only noticing this now?"

"Well it's darker in the woods! If it's so obvious, why didn't you say anything?"

"Because I've been carrying Eleven, and you two idiots said you had navigation under control!"

"Hey, don't look at me," snapped Lucas.

"What?" Dustin demanded. "Why is this all on me?"

"Because you're the compass genius!"

Dustin sighed, spinning on the spot and looking at his compass again. "What do yours say?"

"North," Lucas and Mike replied in unison.

"This makes no damn sense," Dustin groaned. "Any ideas, Chrissy?"

He passed off the compass, allowing her to look at it as well. But the needle was pointing the way they'd been headed. Without seeing the magnetic field, there was no way to tell where the interference was coming from.

"I don't know," she said, spinning it in her hands. "I mean, it could be a third magnet? Layering three magnetic fields? But we would've had to walk a perfect circle right around it."

"So it's in the woods?" Lucas asked.

"Maybe. Still, for the needle to point at neither the whole time…that wouldn't happen if they were two fixed points."

"So maybe the gate moves?" Mike suggested.

"I don't think so," said Dustin. "It's a tear in time and space. Not exactly portable."

"Okay, so…maybe something here is screwing with the compasses. You know, that's how we ended up in the junk yard."

"It's not gonna be just a bad car battery," said Christine. "To cause miles of interference like that, it'd have to be like a super magnet."

"It's not a magnet."

Lucas was glaring back at the path. Eleven was still standing exactly where Christine had put her down, avoiding all their eyes.

"Lucas, knock it off," Christine sighed.

"No! She's been acting weirder than normal! If she can slam doors with her mind, she can definitely screw up a compass."

"Why would she do that?" asked Mike.

"Because she's trying to sabotage our mission. Because she's a traitor!"

"Woah, okay! Hold on, boys." Christine planted herself between Lucas and Eleven as he tried to advance on her. "Look, we're all tired. We're all desperate. Why don't we just sit down for a minute and…?"

"Will doesn't have a minute!" Lucas yelled. He tried to walk around her, only for Christine to grab his arm. It didn't stop him from snarling at Eleven. "You did it, didn't you? You don't want us to reach the gate! You don't want us to find Will!"

"Lucas, come on, seriously," Mike shouted. "Just leave her alone!"

"Admit it. Admit it!"

He broke out of Christine's grip, running at Eleven. She jumped back in terror, but not before he could grab her wrist. He held her arm up to the light. In the dying light, dark blood was shining on her jacket sleeve.

"Fresh blood," he spat, throwing her arm back at her. "I knew it!"

"Lucas, come on!" Mike pleaded.

"I saw her wiping her nose on the tracks! She was using her powers!"

"Lucas, it's just cold," Christine reasoned. "We've been walking for miles…"

"No! She was using her powers, and you and Mike are too stupid to see it because you like her! You think she's cute and innocent, but all she is is a liar!"

"Bull," shouted Mike. "That's probably old blood. Right, El?"

But Eleven did not answer.

Mike squinted at her, fear rising in his voice. "*Right, El?"*

"It's…not…It's not safe…"

Eleven was sniffling again. But it was not because she was using her powers, and it was not because of the cold. Christine could already see the water welling in her eyes. She was moments away from bursting into tears.

"Hey, it's okay," Christine said instinctively. She dropped down next to Eleven, brushing the hair out of her face. "I know it's scary."

"See?" Lucas demanded. "She just admitted it, and all you two care about is making sure that she's okay! But what about Will? She's leading us around in circles and Will's out there running for his life!"

"And we're gonna find him!" yelled Mike. "El's just scared! We—We all are! Right, Dustin?"

Dustin, however, seemed to know better than to answer.

"It doesn't matter how scared she is," said Lucas. "She lied! What did I tell you? She's been playing us from the beginning!"

"That's not true! She helped us find Will!"

"Find Will. Find Will? Where is he then? Huh? I don't see him!"

"Yeah, you know what I mean."

"No, I actually don't. Just think about it, Mike! She could've just told us where the Upside Down was right away, but she didn't. She just made us run around like headless chickens!"

"Alright, calm down," Dustin said, finally pushing between them.

"No!"

Lucas smacked Dustin's arm away, storming toward Eleven again. Christine immediately stepped in front of her.

"She used us!" he yelled. "All of us! She helped just enough so she could get what she wants! Food and a bed! She's like a stray dog!"

"HEY!" Christine shouted, but Mike was beating her to it.

"Screw you, Lucas!"

"No, screw you, Mike! You're blind—both of you! Christine's just lonely cause she's fighting with Nancy, and you're blind because you like that a girl's not grossed out by you. But wake up, man! Wake the hell up!"

"I SAID HEY!"

The boys stopped as Christine rose to her feet again. And now, she was shaking with fury.

"Both of you are going to shut up right now. No one speaks, no one *leaves* until we all calm the fuck down. We're not gonna get anywhere throwing bullshit insults like this. We will figure out where Will is…"

"We don't have to figure it out," Lucas snapped, jabbing a finger at Eleven. "She *knows* where Will is. And now she's letting him die in the Upside Down."

"Lucas, I said stop."

But Lucas would not.

"For all we know, it's her fault!"

"Shut up!" Mike screamed.

"We're looking for some stupid monster, but did you ever stop to think that maybe she's the monster?"

"I said shut up!"

Mike leapt forward, grabbing Lucas around the neck and attempting to throw him to the ground. Lucas was faster, grabbing Mike in the same way and countering the throw with a harsh tug of his own. They wrestled and screamed, toppling over and still attempting to fight.

Everyone was screaming. Christine ran forward with Dustin, trying to pry them apart.

"Stop!"

"Knock it off, you idiots!"

"Boys—Mike, just stop!"

"Stop it!"

"Mike, get off!"

"Stop it!"

"Dustin! A little help, please!"

"AHHHHHHHHHH!"

Before Christine knew what was happening, Lucas was flying out of her hands. His body shot into the air. It was like he was being propelled by an invisible force strong enough to toss him like a rag doll. He hit the ground hard, sliding through the dead grass and colliding with a totaled car.

Dustin and Mike ran forward. Christine stayed where she was, too shocked to move. Then she turned around to gape at Eleven. Her nose was bleeding again, her hands balled into fists at her sides. She looked horrified already, the reality of what she'd done beginning to sink in. But Christine couldn't scold her. Couldn't comfort her or yell. She felt paralyzed in the grass. For the first time, she actually felt afraid.

"Why would you do that?" Mike demanded. He seemed to have figured out what had happened. He looked up from Lucas's limp body, glaring at Eleven the same way he had at the quarry. "What's wrong with you? What is *wrong* with you?"

"Mike…"

Eleven whimpered. It was enough for Christine to push her fear aside. She started toward Eleven, ready to…was she going to comfort her? She had no idea. But Eleven needed to calm down. If bodies started flying when she got upset, the best thing Christine could do was keep the situation under control. But then Dustin called out to her.

"Christine! Chrissy, he's—he's not getting up! W-What do we do if he doesn't get up?"

She froze, torn at Eleven's tearful face and Dustin's broken voice.

"Okay. Just—Just hold on, El." Christine held up a hand and backed toward Lucas's body. "Eleven, just breathe, okay?"

"Christine!"

She turned, and ran to Dustin's side. She slid the last few feet on her knees, despite the pain. Lucas was still lying unconscious against the car. He didn't show the slightest response to Mike's voice, or the way Dustin was shaking him. Christine had to beat his hands back.

"Stop. Stop, Dustin! If he's hurt, you could just make it worse. Just back up."

The boys followed her instructions immediately, which just proved how scared they must've been. Christine braved a straight face. She didn't want to scare them more by admitting she had no idea what she was doing.

She looked over Lucas head to toe. His limbs looked normal and he didn't appear to be bleeding, which was good. Unless all the bleeding was internal, in which case it was very bad. She stroked his hair, trying to ease him into consciousness rather than shout. Unfortunately, that wasn't working either.

"Lucas? Come on, bud. Can you hear me? Lucas?"

"Do we need to give him mouth to mouth?" Dustin asked behind her.

"What—no!"

"Fine! If you don't want to do it, I will. Move!"

"Dustin, stop! He's breathing! We just need him to wake up."

"Oh…"

Christine was ready to break out a water bottle and pour it over his

head. But Lucas stirred before she could ask Mike to hand over her bag.

"Lucas? Oh thank, God."

She sagged back onto her butt, giving the boys more room to push forward.

"Lucas, you okay?" asked Mike with a relieved smile.

Lucas did not respond.

"Lucas, how many fingers am I holding up?" asked Dustin. He waved his hand in front of Lucas's face. "Lucas, how many fingers?"

Again, Lucas did not respond.

"Let me see your head," Mike offered, reaching out.

Lucas smacked his hand out of the air faster than a rattlesnake.

"Don't touch me!" He struggled to his feet, ignoring his friends' concern and shoving Mike again for good measure. "Get off me!"

He pushed his way past the group and marched toward the woods. Christine could hear the fear in his voice. She'd only seen him this upset at the quarry, when his best friend's body was right before his eyes. It was why she grabbed Mike before he could go after him.

"Mike, stop," she said softly. "Just let him go."

"But—But what if he's hurt?"

"Man, just let him go," Dustin agreed.

They watched as Lucas disappeared into the trees. Christine felt sick to do it, but running after him would only make him more upset. Lucas would be alright, she tried to convince herself. He had his compass. And she knew from personal experience how sobering rage could be. So long as nothing else bad happened…

"Where's El?"

Mike's voice echoed around the yard without response. Christine whipped around, staring at the bus, which Eleven had been standing next to less than a minute ago. Now she wasn't. Not next to the bus or the cars or the trees. She wasn't anywhere.

"Eleven!" Christine screamed, looking around at the tree line. "Eleven, it's okay!"

"El?" Mike called, and Dustin joined in. "El! Eleven! Eleven? El!"

They must've screamed for ten minutes. They checked inside every car, behind every bush, searched the forest ten feet deep in all directions. But there was no blonde wig or pink dress in sight.

Christine bit her lip hard. She'd been trying to bottle it all up, trying to be the adult. But it was exhausting.

"FUCK!"

She screamed, and it echoed around the sky. Christine kicked the closest rock, which collided with the closest wreck. The impact chipped the windshield, and Christine watched the crack spider its way across the length of the glass.

Dustin was at her side in an instant.

"We'll find her," he assured her. "Christine, we'll find El. We'll help you look."

"No." Christine felt her body shaking, but her voice was firm. "No, I want the both of you to go home right now."

"No," Mike argued. "El is out there alone! And so is Will!"

"And you're not gonna find them in the dark. You two are going home. Now. Before the sun goes down, and before your parents start asking questions. I will look for Eleven, and I will call you if I find her."

She did not give them room to argue. She seized her backpack from Mike, taking out both her hammer and a flashlight. Then she walked back into the forest, following the train tracks the way they'd came.

It had seemed like a good idea at the time. She'd been so worried about Eleven and Lucas that she hadn't thought twice about marching into the woods alone. It wasn't until she'd lost sight of the junkyard, after she'd followed the train tracks and trekked back into the brush, that her personal safety occurred to her. It was getting dark. Even without leaves, the trees blocked out the fading light overhead. Unlike the boys, she didn't have a compass, and she only had a vague idea where she was going. But at a guess, she wasn't far from Mirkwood—where they'd heard the first twig snap.

The thought made her tighten her hand around her hammer.

Occasionally she'd call out for Eleven. Most times, she tried to make as little noise as possible. The darker it got, the more aware she was of the sound of the wind. Trees rustled in the breeze. Twigs snapped. A few times she thought she heard voices in the distance. She'd called for Eleven—and the sound had immediately stopped.

After she imagined someone calling her name, she decided it was safest to stop looking and find the road.

How she got there was as much a mystery as it was a miracle. But she nearly fell to the pavement with relief. She would have sprinted the last leg home if she weren't so tired. Luckily, someone else had thought ahead.

"Finally," said Dustin, perched on his bike where the wilderness gave way to the suburbs. His headlight blinded her like an interrogation lamp as she approached. "If you were gone another twenty minutes I was gonna call the cops."

"I told you to go home, Dustin."

"I did. Where do you think I got the bike?"

"And you came back here alone? To the place Will went missing? What if something had happened, Dust? Don't be an idiot."

"That's rich, coming from the girl who was just walking alone for over an hour. Now do you want a ride home or not?"

Christine was hesitant. She was a lot bigger than Eleven, and she

hated to put the burden on Dustin. But he was already turning the bike around, patting his back wheel. And her legs were killing her. So she stowed the hammer and flashlight in her bag, and climbed onto the bike.

To his credit, Dustin did a better job keeping them steady than she thought he would. It was only a block or two before they were sailing smoothly. So long as he didn't brake too hard, they had it under control.

"Did you find anything?" he asked her as they cruised down the street.

"Does it look like I found anything?"

"Cranky."

"What about you? Anything at Mike's house?"

"Nah. He thought El might hide in the basement, but there's nothing there."

"Not really surprising," said Christine, and Dustin nodded. The way Mike had yelled at her, Eleven wasn't likely to look for safety in his basement. "What about Lucas? Have you heard from him?"

"No. But he's definitely home. I went passed his house and threw stuff at his window until he closed the blinds. So he's alive."

"That's a relief."

They leaned into a curve as Dustin made a sharp turn. She'd just recovered when he threw her for another loop.

"Why aren't you mad at Eleven?"

"Dustin…"

"I mean, I kind of get it. I'm still worried about her too. But she threw Lucas with her mind. That's not cool."

"I don't think she did it on purpose, Dust. El was scared, and all of us

were screaming. She just wanted it to stop. I think when she gets overwhelmed, her powers probably act up."

"Like Jean Gray," Dustin supplied.

"Sure. Like Jean Gray," Christine agreed. "And then she thought we'd be mad at her, so she ran. I just hope she's okay."

"Still. Lucas had a point, you know? She lied. Will needs us, and we still don't know where the gate is. If Eleven doesn't come back, who knows if we ever will?"

"Dustin, if anyone can find that gate, I know it's you."

He shrugged his shoulders, not all that comforted by the thought. Christine gripped his jacket a little tighter, trying to think of a way to explain it.

"Think of it like this," she tried. "Say there were two sets of train tracks. On one track, one person's tied up, and on the other there are four. You can't move any of them. You can control where the train goes, but it has to follow the tracks. What do you do?"

"I don't know," Dustin said quietly. "Why can't I save them?"

"You don't have enough time. There's no wrong answer, bud. It's just a hypothetical."

"Okay, well…the one I guess. Cause you save more people."

"Alright. Now imagine the same thing, but the four people are me, Will, Mike, and Lucas. What do you do?"

"Who's on the other track?"

"You don't know. It's a stranger."

Dustin was quiet for a few blocks. "Is this a trick question? It feels like a trick question."

"It's not a trick question," said Christine. "But it's hard. That's what Eleven was trying to decide this afternoon. She wanted to protect the

four friends she has, because sometimes that's scarier than losing someone you don't know."

"I guess. I didn't think about it like that."

They didn't talk for the rest of the ride. Christine let Dustin mull over the situation, and kept her eyes on the streets. She was hoping to catch a glimpse of pink hiding behind one of the houses. It was a long shot, but she felt like that was all she had for now. There was only one other place Eleven might be hiding, and Christine couldn't check there just yet.

She hopped off the bike as Dustin leveled with his driveway, allowing him to shoot up and park his bike next to the garage.

"Will you come talk to Lucas with me tomorrow?" he asked her. "You're better at explaining the metaphor than I am."

"I don't know. I think I'm just gonna stay home. In case…you know who comes back."

"But what am I supposed to say to Mike and Lucas? What if they won't talk to each other?"

"They will, Dust. They just need time to cool off. But they're best friends. If anyone can make them see reason, it's you."

"Easy for you to say," Dustin huffed, tugging on his backpack straps. "Whatever. I probably shouldn't be taking advice from you about it anyway."

"Excuse me?" Christine chuckled in surprise and folded her arms. "What does that mean?"

"It means that Lucas and Mike are fighting about Eleven just like you and Nancy are fighting over Steve."

She must have gaped at him for a solid ten seconds.

"No," she managed to squeak through the shock. "Dustin, no! That is —That is so not the same thing!"

"Um, yeah it is."

"No, it is definitely not!"

"Let's think," he said, stroking his chin. "Two really close friends get pushed apart because some cute person comes between them. One of the friends gets hurt, and gets mad cause the other friend doesn't care. *How* is that not the same thing?"

"Okay, well—for one—Steve didn't throw me across a junkyard with his mind."

"No. He just made you cry because he used you to get to Nancy."

Christine shut her mouth. It felt better than standing there with her jaw dropped as she stared at her miniscule fetus of a neighbor, standing there so sure and so confident and so…right. But that didn't mean it didn't hurt.

"Just go inside, Dustin."

She tried to walk back to her house, only for Dustin to grab her hand.

"Hey," he said quickly. "I'm sorry. And I'm sorry about what Lucas said too. About you being lonely and obsessing over Eleven. That was dumb. But if Lucas and Mike are gonna make up, I think you and Nancy should try too. It's easier when everyone's being friends."

"I know it's easier," she said wearily. "It's just not easy to make them that way."

"Okay." Dustin nodded, playing with his backpack again. "Do you wanna stay over? I can ask mom to drive us to the video store."

And just like that, he drew another smile out of her.

"Nah, not tonight, Dusty. Like I said. I'm gonna stay home to be safe."

"Alright. If you need anything…"

"You'll be the first to know," Christine assured him. She rubbed his cap on top of his curls. "Get going. Your mom's probably gonna kill

you."

Dustin scurried inside at her suggestion. The front door slammed behind him, but Christine could still hear Claudia's worried shouts. She smiled, backing off the lawn and sneaking around to her own back door.

It was locked. Not that that meant anything. Christine knocked halfheartedly—two slow, then three quick. There was no response. She tried again, just in case, but got the same result. After a few minutes of waiting, she grabbed her spare key and let herself in.

Everything was exactly where she'd left it. Her unmade bed, the empty pillow fort, the abandoned waffle plates and ruined magazine. The stereo was off, and though she checked her freezer, there were still the same amount of Eggos.

"Eleven?" she called hopelessly. "If you're here, you…you can come out. I'm not mad. No one is. It's okay."

She continued to stand in the dark, knowing she wouldn't get a response.

At some point, her exhaustion must have caught up to her. She didn't bother making dinner. She didn't even bother turning on the lights. She just changed into her pajamas and grabbed her dwindling box of Cheerios. However, she hesitated at the back door.

Habit told her to lock it. She was a teenage girl home alone in a town where two people were missing, mysterious scientists were hunting children, and interdimensional horrors were running loose. But a lock wouldn't stop a mad scientist, and it wouldn't stop a Demogorgon. The only people it might stop were the boys, or a scared little girl looking for a place to sleep after running away.

Christine dropped the cereal in her room. In the kitchen, she popped one waffle in the toaster, then placed it on a plate. She left it on the back stoop, looking longingly at the shadows outside. The waffle would get cold fast, she knew. But it wasn't about whether or not Eleven would eat it. She just wanted to send a sign. It was still safe inside. It was okay to come home.

Without much debate, she left the porch light on. And when she went to bed, she left the door unlocked.

16. All The Right Moves (Reprise)

TRIGGER WARNING: This chapter contains references to underaged drinking and sexual situations, as seen on Stranger Things. It also contains offensive language, slurs used by Steve and Tommy. Please proceed with caution.

When Christine woke up the next day, it was to the sound of her phone ringing on the bedside table. She reached out with an uncoordinated hand, slapping around until she could find it. Her eyes were still closed when she brought it to her ear.

"Hello?" she greeted groggily.

"Christine, where the hell are you?"

Her eyes shot open. She'd been expecting the voice of her father, maybe Dustin or Claudia. But the angry voice of Mr. Vincenti from the movie theater made her blood rush with adrenaline so fast she thought she might vomit. She scrambled to push the covers aside, eyes searching for her clock.

"Shit, I'm—I am so sorry, Anthony!"

"You realize it's Saturday? You know, one of the days you work for me?"

"I do know!" She was already toppling out of bed. The phone base nearly fell off the table, and she jammed her finger trying to catch it. "Like I said, I am so, so sorry. I overslept and…"

"You were still sleeping?"

"No! I mean, I was up and down all night. With the—the funeral! Will's funeral yesterday, and his best friend is my neighbor so, it was just crazy and I was comforting him all night and I am so, so sorry, but it will not happen again!"

Her boss sighed heavily on the other end of the phone. Christine was already struggling into her black pants when he spoke.

"Look, I get it. I try not to be a hardass. This Byers thing has everyone on edge. But that's why I need you at work. When bad things happen, people want to be distracted. And when you wanna be distracted…"

"You go to the movies," Christine finished, straightening her black tank top. "I know, Anthony. I'm sorry."

"Stop apologizing and get your butt down here. You're the most competent teen I've got, and I need someone at concessions. If you can make it in twenty minutes, I won't even cut your pay."

"You got it. Butt moving. Bye."

Christine threw the phone back onto the base. Her hands finally free, she shrugged on her stiff white button down and slipped into her boots. She grabbed her bowtie off the dresser and ran out of her room.

Her excuse hadn't been a total lie. Will's funeral had been yesterday, and everything had gone crazy. She had been up very late, and woken up several times during the night. But it wasn't because of Dustin's crying. It was because she was compulsively checking the house for Eleven.

She'd gotten up every hour, making some excuse for herself. She would just go get a refill of water and check the kitchen. She would just go to the bathroom and peek out the back door. Once she'd gotten a thrill when she noticed the waffle was gone, but then she'd noticed the paw prints adorning the stoop. It was more likely that the waffle had become a late night snack for Mews.

As she rushed around her house getting ready, she scanned the rooms once more. She wasn't very hopeful. Eleven hadn't come back last night, and she hadn't come back this morning. She could only hope she'd gone to Mike's instead. The only other option was the woods, and that didn't bear thinking about. Sure, Eleven could defend herself with her powers. But that didn't mean it wasn't scary. And Christine knew how much Eleven hated being alone.

When she left for work, she left both doors unlocked.

With a burst of inhuman speed, Christine made it to The Hawk in fifteen minutes. She'd skipped breakfast and her hair was a wreck, but she'd seen worse mornings. Her hair was yanked back into another lackluster ponytail, and she'd just pop an extra batch of popcorn so she had something to eat. It wasn't the first time she'd had popcorn and soda for breakfast. With her penchant for running late, it also wouldn't be the last.

Anthony had been right about the rush. *All the Right Moves* had been playing for two weeks already, and somehow their first matinee nearly sold out. Christine was scrambling to catch up with her duties, and hadn't even gotten the chance to sit before the second showing started. But finally, she'd have a few minutes to herself.

It would have been smart to work on her homework. But what Christine pulled out of her bag was a portable radio. She set it up on the counter, the volume low so as not to disturb the patrons in the theater. Then she fiddled with the knob until she found a station that was purely static.

Christine folded her arms on the counter, laying down her head and closing her eyes. She listened intently to the sounds of the static. Maybe if she focused enough, she'd be able to make sense of the blips and buzzing. Maybe she'd find some sign that Will, Barb, and Eleven were okay. She knew she wasn't Eleven, of course. She didn't have superpowers. But if she kept the radio on…maybe Eleven could still contact her, wherever she was.

"This your favorite station?"

The voice in her ear startled her. She jumped to her feet, and her folding chair screeched against the floor as it skittered back into the popcorn machine. Steve, Tommy, Carol and Nicole all giggled.

"Steve," Christine breathed, clutching her chest. "Uh…hey, guys. The —The next showing's not for another two hours."

"So what?" Steve asked with a grin. "Can't a guy just come and see his lab partner?"

"Yeah, *Christine*." Tommy grabbed the radio and hopped up to sit on

the display case. "Party in the lobby, am I right?"

Christine wrestled the radio out of his hands before he could raise the volume. She almost managed to be thankful for Carol when she tugged Tommy back to the ground.

"Get down, asshole. The last thing we need is for your fat ass to break the glass."

"I thought you liked my fat ass."

"Yeah, well I'm tired of cleaning up after it…"

"Anyway," Steve said pointedly, turning back to Christine. "I just wanted to talk to you for a sec."

"Okay," she said warily. "But, I haven't gotten the chance to start the lab report, Steve. Honestly, you're probably better off doing it yourself."

"What? No, I—not about science. About Nancy."

Christine felt a bolt of panic go through her chest.

"Why? Is she okay? Is she safe?"

"Yeah," Steve said, who looked shocked by her palpable fear. "I mean, I think so."

"I think she's doing just fine," Tommy drawled, wrapping an arm around Carol's shoulder.

Christine didn't miss the amused tone of voice, nor the glare that Steve sent his way. She didn't have the energy for any more drama this week. But when Steve turned to her again, he looked just as exhausted as she felt. And honestly, really worried.

"Can we talk in private?" he asked lowly. "Please?"

"Oh, uh…" She glanced at Tommy, Carol and Nicole, who were lounging all too casually around the lobby. "I'm not really supposed to leave concessions."

"Please," he repeated. "I mean, it's Hawkins, right? What are they gonna do? Break the glass and steal some Airheads?"

Part of her was getting ready to tell him just what kind of nasty things could happen in Hawkins, but he laid his hand over hers before she could.

"Chrissy, I'm begging you. Five minutes."

Her resolve crumbled. With a last guarded look at the popular kids, she turned off her radio and slipped it back into her bag.

"Five minutes," she agreed.

She followed him around the corner, down the hall towards the alleyway. It didn't offer all that much privacy. She could still here Tommy and Carol's obnoxious voices drifting down to them, but at least they were out of sight.

"Sorry," Steve apologized immediately. "They've been giving me crap all weekend. I'm just starting to get sick of it."

"I get it," Christine offered, leaning her back on the wall. "No offense, but I think I've been sick of Tommy and Carol since the seventh grade."

He chuckled at that. Christine wished she couldn't feel her chest swell with pride. Feelings were stupid as hell.

"How are you feeling?" he asked finally.

"Fine." She watched him run a hand through his hair, and her stomach clenched. She remembered she was supposed to be sick. "Better, I mean. Since the party."

"Good. Good, good, yeah…"

Steve nodded, and looked down at the orange carpet. One hand was tapping his chin speedily. His knee was bouncing too, just like he did before he took a long shot in a basketball game. It was a nervous tick he had. But Christine couldn't imagine what was making him nervous.

"Steve?" she prompted. "Four and a half minutes."

"Hm? Oh—right, sorry. Uh…I just wanted to ask if…I don't know. Have—Have you talked to Nancy lately?"

"Not really," she sighed. "Not since…what was it? Wednesday night, I guess. When she was blaming me for Barb going missing."

"She what?" he asked in surprise.

"I told you. We got into a big fight about talking to the cops. She wanted to make sure I was coming to school since I was the last person to see Barb. And she thinks I was stupid to fall asleep and leave her alone."

"That's—That's crazy, though. You know that, right? That's not your fault."

"Yeah, I know," Christine mumbled. "It's no one's fault, it's just one of those things, bad things happen to good people, all that crap. It still sucks."

Steve nodded, and stuck his hands in his pockets. "But you—you haven't talked to Nance about anything else? You haven't seen her?"

"No. Well, I saw her yesterday at the funeral but we didn't…"

"She was there?" Steve asked with rapt attention. "Was she there with Jonathan?"

Christine stared at him.

"It was his brother's funeral. So yeah. Jonathan was there."

"No, I meant—like did you see them sitting together? Were they talking?"

"No? Jonathan was sitting with his parents. You know. Cause it was *his brother's funeral."* Steve nodded shakily, but didn't look convinced. "Why do you wanna know about Jonathan anyway?"

Steve let out a dry laugh. Nervous hands wormed out of his pockets

and through his hair again. He folded his arms, then rested them on his hips instead. His knee was still bouncing.

"So…So I go over to the Wheelers' yesterday, right? After the funeral, just to apologize and to check up on her. I thought maybe I could take her to see this stupid movie again, take her mind off things. But she blew me off. Which—I mean, I get it. Things have been crazy, a kid's dead, her brother was friends with him. But she seemed really… I don't know. Off. Nervous, scared. And she was swinging a baseball bat around her garage like some kind of lunatic. She said she'd call me later and…she didn't."

"Steve," Christine said gently. "I'm sure she was just with Mike. Yesterday was rough for him."

"Yeah, but that's the thing," said Steve, finally looking up at her. "I went over there to check on her again, and…she wasn't with Mike. She was with Jonathan."

"…wait, what?"

"Jonathan. Byers. He was in her room."

Christine's brain struggled to create an image matching the description. Jonathan Byers, with his worn out denim jacket and shadowy eyes, standing amidst Nancy's white wicker furniture and pastel pillows.

"No way," she said, actually smiling. "Look, I'm sure if Jonathan was ever at the Wheelers' it was just to talk. To Mike, maybe. He's not even friends with Nancy."

"They were certainly friends last night. He was sitting on her bed, he had his arms around her and…"

"Wait, they were kissing?" Christine choked out.

"No!" Steve shook his head fervently, blinking hard. "I mean—I don't know. I left pretty quick. But they were together, and so I…I guess I just…has she talked about him at all…?"

"Definitely not," she assured him. She was still reeling. "Look,

maybe…I don't know. Maybe he and his mom came over to talk to Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler. It was the funeral, right? Maybe she was just comforting him."

"Right. They looked really comfortable."

Christine wanted to argue, but she couldn't find the words. Had she really missed that much in the week she hadn't spoken to Nancy? She had never, *ever* expressed interest in Jonathan Byers. She'd only ever had eyes for Steve. And she'd gotten him. Nancy should be happy, if a little stressed. Unless…

It was hard to stop her brain from spinning wild stories. What if she'd gotten Steve and already gotten bored? What if she'd gotten Steve, and then realized she didn't like him as much as she thought she did? What if she'd only taken him because Christine liked him? Barb had been the one to say it was turning into some twisted competition. Maybe Steve had been the prize and Nancy had just wanted to get there first.

She thought back to their sleepover, and Nancy admitting her schoolyard crush on Peter Jorgins. Christine had been friends with her for years and not known. Was it the same with Jonathan? Had Nancy always been interested in him, but felt too embarrassed to say anything? Or had it just been a spur of the moment connection? Jonathan looking for a distraction from Will's death, and Nancy willing to help? Was…Was Nancy even capable of something like that?

Christine's brain warred with itself. She couldn't believe it. And she wouldn't. Not without talking to Nancy. They were supposed to be friends, and despite all the fighting and the bitching and the lashing out, she still cared about her. Saying she cheated on Steve with Jonathan was a huge accusation. It was insane.

But Steve spoke before Christine could explain any of this.

"I just can't believe she'd do something like this. I mean, after everything at my party…"

Christine flushed. *That* wasn't a particularly comfortable conversation

to land on.

"Um…look, I…I'm sure it's nothing personal. I mean, I know I was asleep, but I'm sure that…you know…whatever you and Nancy did went…fine…"

Steve blinked at her. It seemed to be a few seconds before he realized what she was talking about, at which point he began spluttering. He even looked like he was blushing.

"Oh, no! No, I didn't—that's not—I mean, it did, but I wouldn't wanna talk—shit, um—not me! I meant Jonathan!"

"Jonathan?" Christine repeated slowly. "What about him?"

"What happened at the party."

"He wasn't at the party."

The silence that followed made Christine extremely uneasy. Steve was squinting at her, confused and incredulous. It was making her feel stupid. She racked her brains, trying to remember what had happened Tuesday night in her drunken haze. Jonathan definitely hadn't been invited. She wasn't drunk enough to forget that. Had it been before she got there? Had someone said something about him? What could have happened that was making Steve look at her like he had to break the news that someone else had died?

"Do you seriously not know?" he asked quietly.

"Know *what*, Steve?"

His mouth opened and closed mutely. He ran a hand through his hair, and Christine swore if he did it again she might grab his wrist and break it. "I mean, I know you skipped some school, but…shit. You really haven't talked to Nancy, have you?"

"About *what?"*

"About, uh…okay…I really wish I didn't have to tell you this. Shit."

"Steve, just spit it out!"

"Fine!" He looked down at her, conflicted. "Jonathan was at my party that night."

"Okay. Well, I didn't see him."

"Of course not. None of us did. He was standing in the damn bushes taking pictures."

"He…*what?"*

"He had his stupid little camera and he was taking pictures," he said, talking very quickly now. "Nicole takes photography too, so she went to the dark room last week and bumped into Jonathan. And she didn't think anything of it, cause he's in there all the time—you know, cause he has no friends. But then she saw his photos hanging up, and they were all grainy pictures of us around my pool."

"Pictures of…? He—He was…?"

"Being a regular Peeping Tom, yeah. He must've gotten there around the same time as you. Honestly, we thought he might've followed you or something. Tommy thought that you were in on it, for a while."

"That I was *what?"*

Christine pushed off the wall, taking several angry steps forward. Steve scrambled back, until he was the one with his back to the wall.

"Woah! Hey! I didn't say anyone believed him! You know Tommy, he just loves saying stupid shit! And he thought that since you were so pissed at Nancy you might be trying to get back at her. You know, blackmail or whatever."

"Blackmail?" She was tired of repeating him, but she couldn't find her footing in the conversation. "What the fuck are you talking about, Steve?"

"The pictures," he explained shakily. "I mean, they show all of us drinking. Which, you know, is illegal. And then there were the really creepy ones of Nancy in the pool, and then…then you know…the ones uh…in my room."

Christine clapped a hand over her mouth. This time, she really might vomit. She was sure of it. Of course, she'd been mad at Nancy. She'd been furious. But she would never do something like this. She'd never wish, never even think about something happening like this. Jonathan Byers was a weirdo, sure. But she never thought he'd been capable of this.

There seemed to be a lot of that going around.

She wobbled on the spot, and Steve grabbed her shoulder to steady her.

"Hey, I never believed Tommy, alright? I know you'd never do that to Nancy. I mean, you were in the pictures too, right? You had your whiskey, and then…then you were crying in the living room. And Barb was out on the diving board with her hand…"

Christine's head snapped up. "What?"

"Barbara. Remember when she cut her hand?"

"No, I know," Christine snapped. "She was sitting on the diving board?"

"Uh, yeah. After everyone went upstairs."

"I…I don't remember that."

"Oh, well…you weren't in the picture so, maybe it was after you passed out."

Christine's mind zapped back into motion. Barb had been on the diving board. Jonathan had been there. It had been after she passed out.

She stared up at Steve in horror. "Did you tell the cops?"

"What? No." He shook his head in confusion. "Look, I know he was being a creep, but I took care of it."

"Not about Jonathan, about Barb. The pictures."

"Christine, I didn't tell them about anything. I'm in enough trouble as it is cause Nancy blabbed about the beers. I don't need photo evidence."

Her jaw dropped. "I can't believe you."

"You—You can't believe *me*?" he repeated incredulously. "What about you? You know, if those pictures went to the cops, you'd be in trouble too!"

"It doesn't matter!"

"Why not?"

"Because! I'm not the last one who saw Barb alive. Jonathan was."

"Christine…"

But she wasn't listening. Christine ran back through the lobby and down the opposite hallway. She knocked on the office door and let herself in without waiting for a response.

"Hey, Anthony, can I use your phone? Thanks."

Her boss jumped behind his desk, staring as she leapt for the phone on the desk. "Who's up front?"

"No one."

"Christine, I've told you…!"

"One call," she said shortly, already punching in the numbers.

There wasn't much he could do as she held the phone up to her ear. It rang and rang, but there was no response. That wasn't entirely a surprise. No one had been at her house when she'd left, but she was still holding onto far flung hopes. She hung up and dialed again, calling a different number. This time it only rang twice.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Claudia! It's Christine."

"Hello, sweetheart! Is everything alright?"

"Yeah. I'm just looking for Dustin. Is he home?"

"Oh, no. You know Dusty! Up at the crack of dawn and out on his bike. You could try…?"

"Okay. Thanks, Claudia."

She hung up the phone, and started to dial again.

"Christine," Anthony said wearily. "You said one call. It's been…"

"Anthony, Will Byers is dead and my best friend has been reported missing. I'm just trying to get some information. Thanks."

Anthony sagged back in his seat, and grumpily turned to his expense reports.

"Hello?" the voice on the phone asked.

"Hi, Mrs. Wheeler. This is Christine Walcott."

"Christine! Thank God. Do you know where Nancy is?"

"Oh, uh…no? I was calling to look for Mike."

"Michael's not home. In fact, neither of my children are."

"Okay. Well thanks, Mrs…"

"Christine, did you stay over last night?"

Christine clamped her mouth shut. So Nancy did have someone spending the night. Someone her parents didn't know about. Someone that definitely wasn't her, and definitely wasn't Steve.

Nancy Wheeler had some gall.

"Nope," Christine said with a shrug. "Sorry, Mrs. Wheeler. I was with Dustin. I'm really sorry, but I'm at work, so I've got to run. Thanks."

She hung up before Mrs. Wheeler could ask any other questions. She

plugged in one last number and waited for someone to pick up.

"Hawkins Police Department. This is Flo speaking. How may I direct your call?"

"Hi. My name's Christine Walcott. I'm a friend of Barbara Holland's, and I spoke to two officers earlier this week?"

"Their names?" she asked dully.

"Uh…I can't remember. The guys who came down to the high school. But I had some more information I wanted to report. I was wondering if I could speak to one of them?"

"If you would like to file a report, you can come down to the station at your earliest convenience."

"I'm not filing a report," Christine said in annoyance. "I'm offering more information on a missing persons case."

"And you can come down to the station to offer it."

"I'm at work right now."

"Then you can come down to the station at your earliest convenience."

"Seriously? Will Byers' funeral was yesterday, there's a teenage girl still missing, and Hawkins Police isn't going to put every available officer on the case? You don't have anyone that you can send over to take a statement?"

The woman named Flo sighed heavily. *"What is your address?"*

Christine rattled off her information, instructing them to send a cruiser to The Hawk as soon as possible. Then she darted out of the office before Anthony could get to lecturing her again.

Calling the police hadn't been an incredibly helpful idea. She knew that the police couldn't actually find Barbara, not if she was trapped in the Upside Down. But without Eleven, they were her best place to start. If Christine could talk to an officer, she might be able to get more information about the case—what the other kids from the party

had reported, whether or not they'd found Barb's car, if her parents had received any mysterious calls or electrical problems. It might give her a better idea of where Barb was hiding in the other dimension. And while she had the cops around, Christine could report Jonathan Byers for being a class A pervert too.

Steve and his crew were gone when she got back to the lobby. That wasn't a surprise so much as it was a relief. If she had to hear Tommy crack a joke about Jonathan spying on them, or Nancy sleeping with him, she probably would've gone postal. With some quiet, Christine was free to hop behind the counter and go back to her radio. If ever she needed to reach Eleven, it was now.

The second matinee showing let out. Christine didn't pay any attention to the patrons who were lingering in the lobby, or the ones were whispering on the sidewalk. She just darted into the theater and began sweeping as fast as possible.

It was a mistake she didn't realize until a few minutes later.

Christine cleaned the theater, then took care of the bathrooms. Arms full of garbage, she kicked the alley door open before she heard the voices on the other side. She was so focused, she didn't even realize the hush that fell over the alley as she walked to the dumpster. She didn't notice anything until she turned around to go back inside and found six sets of eyes staring at her.

The alleyway was filled with people. Steve, Tommy, Carol and Nicole had clearly decided to hang out here after they'd fled the lobby. A couple empty cups and boxes on the ground confirmed her suspicions that they'd swiped some snacks from the counter while she was too busy to notice. But they'd found other ways to occupy themselves. Tommy held a can of red spray paint at his side, and the wall behind him read, *"Byers is a perv."*

Down at the opposite end of the alley, Nancy was standing with Jonathan Byers at her side.

"What's going on?" Christine asked.

She immediately felt very stupid. It didn't take a genius to figure out

what was going on.

"Oh you know," sighed Carol. "Just catching up."

"Thanks for the snacks by the way," Tommy said with a grin. "Hope you don't mind."

"Go to hell, Tommy."

"Christine?" Nancy's voice cracked as she called her name. "You're… You knew they were…?"

To Christine's surprise, Nancy started marching forward, her hands balled into fists at her side. She looked positively livid. Jonathan made a grab for her shoulder, and Steve stepped in front of Christine.

"Hey, hey, cool it," he said, holding up a hand. "She didn't know."

"Bullshit," spat Nancy, as Jonathan pulled her back.

"Didn't know about what?" Christine asked. Her defenses were already up, and she laughed humorlessly. "Oh! Are we talking about all the things Christine didn't know?"

"Oh shit," Tommy giggled to Carol. "Here it comes…"

But Christine was too focused on Nancy to care.

"How about that you went looking for Barb, but didn't tell me? Cause what—you were too busy thinking it was my fault? Or what about the fact that Byers took creepy pictures of all of us? *Naked* pictures of you?"

"I wasn't…"

"But that's fine. Don't tell Christine. And let's not tell the cops, either. Let's let everyone think it's Christine's fault Barb's gone, because she was last person to see Barb and she's so irresponsible for falling asleep! Let's not tell anyone how Jonathan was trespassing, and stalking us, cause he might get in trouble! And you know what? Maybe I'll just sleep with him while I'm at it!"

"That is *not* what happened. And if you were my friend you'd believe that. You're supposed to *believe* me, Christine!"

"And I thought I did! I really did. Steve told me and I thought, 'No. No way would Nancy Wheeler do that.' But then I got off the phone with your mom and…"

"You called my *mother?"*

"Yeah! Cause I was looking for you. Or Mike. Or anyone who might be able to tell me what's going on, since *Christine* doesn't know anything! And your mom asked if I was the one who slept in your room last night. So. What do you have to say to that, Nancy?"

Gasps and oohs filled the alley as they stared off. Steve had stepped aside, pulled to the wall by Carol who wanted to sit back and watch the show. Jonathan made another attempt to grab Nancy's arm.

"Nancy, let's just go…"

"No." Nancy ripped out of his touch, stalking forward as she glowered at Christine. "You're a real bitch, you know that?"

"Ha! Maybe I am," Christine countered, stepped up as well. "But at least I'm sane. And hey, I'm not a stalker. That's better than I can say for the two of you."

"God, you are *so* self-absorbed! He wasn't stalking us! He was in the woods looking for his brother!"

"Yeah, and then he stood in front of Steve's house for twenty minutes taking pictures of a pool party. Wow, you're right! He's a regular investigative journalist! Let's just give him the Pulitzer now!"

"You're just jealous!" Nancy was backpedaling, going back to her cornerstone argument. "You've been such a shitty friend all week, and it's cause you're so busy wallowing in your own jealousy that you've got no idea that there are more important things going on!"

"Of course I'm jealous!"

She was saying too much. Could hear Nicole and Carol gasping while

Tommy elbowed Steve in the ribs. But she was too far gone now and there was no way for her logical brain to send a clear message to her mouth.

"I've always been jealous!" she screamed. "Cause you've got the perfect nuclear family and the perfect grades and the perfect face! Everyone thinks you're perfect! And so Steve liked you! And you wanted me to be the perfect friend and support your perfect relationship! But you didn't give a crap about me, or my feelings, and you treated me like shit! And what's worse is that now you're treating Steve like shit! Did you ever even like him? Huh? Or were you just sleeping with him to prove that you could? Cause that's another thing that you can do and I can't?"

"Shut up! Of course, I…"

"Or maybe you were just biding your time til Byers came along, huh? Did you always like him, or does the stalker thing turn you on?"

"I said shut up!" Nancy screamed. "You have *no* idea what I've been through this week!"

"Two guys, for one thing."

Nancy charged forward, and Jonathan caught her around the middle. She struggled in his arms, prompting a few jeers from Tommy and Carol. Jonathan had to yell to make himself heard over them.

"Nancy, stop! Stop it! We're just wasting time!"

"Oh, this is a waste of time?" Steve had stepped up again, standing between Christine and Nancy as he glared daggers into Jonathan's face. "No, no, no. You don't get to say this is a waste of your time. I think you deserve everyone here an apology, man."

"An apology?" he repeated incredulously.

"Yeah. Seems to me like your deviant habits are really putting a strain on some people. I think you should apologize."

"Right, my deviant habits," Jonathan laughed. "None of this happened because you're an asshole."

"Hey," Tommy barked, hopping down from his perch. "Watch your mouth, faggot."

For a moment, it seemed like Jonathan was going to lash back. But with some ungodly amount of self-control, he took Nancy by the arm and started walking to the mouth of the alley.

Unfortunately, Steve wasn't done with him yet. He followed them step by step, shoving Jonathan's back every few words.

"You know what, Byers? I'm actually kind of impressed. I always took you for a queer, but I guess you're just a little screw up like your father. Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. That house is full of screw ups. You know, I guess I shouldn't be surprised! A bunch of screw ups in your family!"

"Jonathan, leave it," Nancy begged over Steve's tirade. "Jonathan!"

"I mean, your mom? Psh! I mean, I'm not even surprised what happened to your brother!"

"Steve!" Christine yelled. "Stop it!"

"Jonathan, I said leave it!"

"I'm sorry I have to be the one to tell you this, but the Byers? Their family is the disgrace to the entire—…!"

Jonathan's self-control ran out.

Steve had fallen into the wall before anyone had seen it coming. Christine screamed, and Nicole had slapped her hands over her mouth. Somehow, Tommy was still puffing on his cigarette with mild interest. There was a deadly moment of silence as Steve clutched his face. Then, he pounced on Jonathan.

The next seconds passed in a blur. Steve and Jonathan were wrestling, struggling to keep their hands free long enough to punch the other in the face. Nancy and Christine both ran forward. They tried to break the boys apart, but it was hard to get close without getting punched themselves. First Steve was on top, then Jonathan, then Steve again.

"Get in there!" Carol yelled, shoving Tommy forward. "He's gonna hurt himself!"

Tommy stood between them for a grand total of two seconds before Steve pushed him out of the way. "Get out of here! Get out of here."

"Fine! Fight over the whore!"

Christine wasn't sure when the decision was made. One minute they were all watching Steve and Jonathan. The next, she'd propelled herself between them and was lunging for Tommy's throat.

"Christine!"

Tommy slammed into the wall, his head thunking solidly against the plywood he'd been decorating with slurs. "Ow! Stop! What the fuck…?"

"Shut up!" Christine screeched, and she rammed her fist into his nose. "Just shut! The fuck! Up!"

It was impossible to distinguish between the fights. Everyone was screaming or grunting in pain. Nancy had leapt forward to grab Christine, while Carol was trying to restrain her arms without getting scratched. Nicole was ushering Tommy away, helping him cradle his bleeding nose. Christine was kicking and screaming so loudly that hardly anyone was paying attention to Steve and Jonathan rolling on the ground.

The police car pulled up not long after that.

"Cops!" Tommy yelled down the alley. "Come on, Carol! Let's go!"

"Get back here!"

It was Christine and the police, all screaming in unison and fury. Nancy held Christine tight while Jonathan was handcuffed, and the other cop chased a heavily beaten Steve and Tommy down the alley.

"Hey!" The first one bellowed. He grabbed Christine by the shoulders. "Knock it off! You understand me? Knock it off!"

It was one of the two cops she'd spoken to at the school, Powell. He glared down at her, daring her to keep up the commotion. But with Tommy out of her sight, with the fighting stopped, all of Christine's energy had drained away. Even anger was too much work. She brought her bruised knuckles to her mouth, eyes watering.

"Sorry," she said brokenly. "I just—I'm sorry…"

"Yeah, everyone's hella sorry when they get caught," he said gruffly. "Get in the cruiser. All three of you."

"Officer," Nancy said, one hand still on Christine's arm. "Do we really need…?"

"Now!"

There was no more argument. Powell lugged Jonathan to the car, tossing him into the back seat. Nancy dove after him, trying to get him situated upright while he had no use of his hands. Reluctantly, Christine climbed in beside her. The door slammed shut, and she repressed a jump.

The car was almost silent. Jonathan and Nancy spoke in dark whispers, asking each other if they were okay, assuring the other they were fine. Christine just glared out the window. There was a lot she didn't know, but she felt certain she'd feel better if she'd landed a few more punches to Tommy H's face.

Powell returned with his partner empty handed. Well, Powell was empty handed. Callahan was cradling his nose where Jonathan had caught him in the face. They didn't acknowledge the teens in the back seat as they climbed into the car, and they barely acknowledged each other as they pulled out of the alley.

As they turned onto the main road, Christine glanced up at the front of The Hawk. It looked like Tommy had certainly been busy while she was talking to Steve. Though how he'd accomplished it, she wasn't sure. The front marquee was covered in the same red spray paint. It now read, *"All the Right Moves: Starring Nancy 'The Slut' Wheeler."*

Christine's heart sank. At least she had the rest of the drive to think about how royally she'd fucked up.

17. Government Big

The Hawkins Police Department was not a large building. For a town with a population of 30,000, it seemed odd that there were less than ten people in the building. Christine got the pleasure of meeting Flo, the flat-voiced secretary, as Callahan dragged her into the building. Powell had taken charge of Jonathan, probably because Callahan was too scared after his nose. Nancy was given the privilege of walking on her own.

They were split up and asked to give their preliminary statements separately. This time, Christine did not hold back. She told them about the party and the drinks, Jonathan's alleged pictures, Tommy's graffiti, Steve's heckling, and Jonathan's first swing of the fight. She admitted to punching Tommy a few times, but without a victim coming forward, she was pretty sure there was nothing they could do to her. And she doubted Tommy would admit to be assaulted by a nerd girl anytime soon.

After that, Christine slumped in a chair by the window. She was not allowed to go home yet, for some unknown reason. She also didn't know what she was waiting for. Maybe she was supposed to bear witness to whatever crime they were pushing on Jonathan. He was the only one in handcuffs. They looked good on him, but even Christine thought assaulting an officer was a stretch. Callahan just seemed like a wimp who got in the way of a stray elbow.

Christine was surprised as anyone when Nancy sat down next to her.

"I got you some ice," she offered, passing off the balled-up towel. "For your hand."

"Oh, uh…thanks."

Christine hissed at the cold contact. Still, hopefully it would ease off the ache. She was about to comment that Jonathan needed it more, but a quick look confirmed that he'd gotten the first batch. He was multitasking, the cold pack sitting on top of his knuckles while he face-planted to ice his black eye.

"How are you feeling?" Nancy asked hesitantly.

"Fine," Christine said with a shrug. "You guys pulled me back pretty fast. I don't think I did too much damage—to me or Tommy."

Nancy nodded, the tiniest smirk on her face. "You do know that Tommy was on your side, right?"

"Gross," Christine groaned. "I never want to hear that sentence again in my life."

"Seriously, Christine. He was trying to help Steve. Why did you punch him?"

Christine stared at Nancy. The final straw had become pretty clear to her after the adrenaline had drained from her system. She didn't want to hear Tommy H running his mouth about her best friend. Christine had been hurling her own accusations only a few minutes before him, but that didn't mean *he* was allowed to do it. But she didn't feel like trying to explain that. So she shrugged.

"Do I need a reason? I've been dying to punch Tommy all week. I'm just pissed I didn't break his nose when I had the chance."

Nancy shook her head, which helped to hide the way her smirk was growing. Christine tested out a smile. It fell fast, her own guilt weighing it down.

"Hey," she said softly. "For what it's worth, I didn't know about the graffiti. If I'd seen it, he wouldn't have made it out of the alley breathing."

"Right," Nancy said skeptically.

"No, I'm serious. I know I've messed up a lot, but…I wouldn't let someone do that to you. Steve came in asking to talk about you, and I thought you might've been in some kind of trouble. Then when he told me about Jonathan and the pictures, I—I just kinda lost it. They must've taken advantage of the distraction."

"I get it," Nancy said, though her voice was subdued. "And, for what it's worth, I didn't…you know. With Jonathan."

"Okay." Christine nodded. She wanted to take Nancy at her word, but there was still so much evidence against her. "If you didn't, then… Nance, what the hell is going on?"

Nancy looked at her fully for the first time. For a moment, she looked just like Steve—conflicted and completely at a loss for what to say. But her wide, fearful eyes reminded Christine of someone else, too. Someone who had seen too much, and had no idea how to put it into words.

"Nancy," Christine pleaded, lowering her voice. "What happened?"

Before Nancy could respond, the door to the precinct slammed open. Mrs. Byers was wearing the same leather jacket she'd worn to the funeral, but all traces of the spacy, despaired mother were gone. She blew past the receptionist desk and let herself into the bullpen, eyes locked on her son.

"Hey! Jonathan? Jesus, wha—what happened?"

"I'm fine," Jonathan assured her, and Officer Callahan stood up behind him.

"Ma'am…"

"Why is he wearing handcuffs?" Mrs. Byers demanded.

"Well, your boy assaulted a police officer, that's why."

"Take them off."

"I am afraid I cannot do that."

"Take them off!"

"You heard her. Take them off."

Mrs. Byers had been followed into the room by Chief of Police Jim Hopper. Christine had only seen him one or two times. Maybe at an assembly or a summer fair. He looked every bit like his intimidating reputation. He was the tallest person in the room, with a disheveled appearance and tired face that clearly read: *"I am not going to deal*

with your bullshit."

Christine shrunk involuntarily into her chair.

"Chief," Powell interrupted, stepping up from his desk in the corner. "I get that everyone's emotional here, but there's something you need to see."

"Now?" asked Hopper, and Powell nodded gravely.

"Now."

Hopper sighed, wiping a hand down his beard. "Okay. Okay, move it."

"Hop…"

"I'll be right back, Joyce," he assured Mrs. Byers.

Without removing the handcuffs, Chief Hopper followed his two officers out of the precinct.

Christine averted her eyes as Jonathan's mom fussed over him, turning instead to Nancy. "What do you think it is?"

"Oh," she said weakly. "I…I don't know."

Her shifty eyes suggested otherwise, but Christine didn't want to push. She got her answer a few minutes later regardless.

Hopper returned with a large cardboard box, which he dropped heavily onto the desk in front of Jonathan. Christine couldn't see inside from where she was sitting, but she could hear the sturdy clank of metal. Jonathan apparently didn't need to look up to know what it was. Thankfully, his mother decided to narrate helpfully as she peered in the box.

"Is that…is that a bear trap?" she asked. "And—And lighter fluid, and guns and…what is this?"

"Why don't you ask your son?" Hopper asked darkly. "We found it in his car."

"What?"

"Why are you going through my car?" Jonathan demanded.

"Is that really the question you should be asking me right now?" Hopper leaned dangerously over the top of the box. It was a miracle Jonathan didn't shirk back. "I wanna see you in my office."

He started toward the hallway, only for Jonathan to call him back.

"You won't believe me."

Hopper paused, glaring evenly. "Why don't you give me a try?"

He nodded to Callahan, who reluctantly released Jonathan from his handcuffs. He was instantly swept up into a hug by his mother, which he returned with vigor. Christine watched as he looked over her shoulder, sharing a tense look with Nancy. He shook his head into his mother's neck. Then without a word, he was carted off to the hallway.

Christine was about to ask what that was about when Nancy jumped out of her seat.

"I'm coming with him!"

Everyone turned to stare at her, each more shocked than the next.

"No," said Hopper, the first to recover. "I think your boyfriend can handle a little one on one."

"He's not—I mean, I was there when he bought it."

"No she wasn't," Jonathan said immediately. "She's just covering for me."

"I paid for it. It's my stuff."

"It's not!"

"Nancy?" Christine gasped, but she got no response.

Hopper was looking more annoyed by the minute.

"Who the hell is this?" he asked Mrs. Byers.

"She's—This is Nancy Wheeler," she answered, looking just as confused. "She's uh…her brother is friends with Will."

"Fine," Hopper sighed. "Fine, you wanna make things more complicated? Be my guest. Come on."

"Nancy," Christine repeated. "What the hell are you doing?"

"It's fine," Nancy assured her. "It's okay."

Whatever was 'fine' or 'okay,' Nancy didn't bother to explain. She followed the police chief and the Byers out of the room, and disappeared behind the office door.

Christine huffed.

"Is that it, then?" she demanded, glaring at Officer Powell. "Can I go home now?"

"No," he said, sitting back at his desk.

"Why not?"

"Cause you're annoying. And I'm kind of hoping whatever guy you beat up is gonna come in so we can detain you and laugh at him."

She sunk back into her seat, defeated.

The minutes slipped by over the clock face. Christine watched the hands tick in slow motion. They were moving, but nothing else seemed to be. No one else came or left the precinct. No one entered or exited the chief's office. She strained her ears, but she couldn't hear any screaming, arguing, or concerned voices. Whatever was happening, they were doing it quietly.

Her butt was starting to go numb from sitting so long. Callahan snapped at her more than once for tapping her foot or drumming her nails on the arm of the chair. She'd started to do it just to annoy him. It wasn't smart. If they were trying to charge Jonathan with assault they could easily try and stick something on her. Maybe then she'd

get arrested and thrown into the Chief's office too.

It felt like ages before anything interesting happened. Even then, it was just another concerned mother with an injured boy coming to file a complaint. Christine completely disregarded it until the woman finally coaxed her son into telling his story.

"We…We weren't doing anything," he insisted to Officer Callahan. "We were just hanging out by the quarry, and all of the sudden this weird girl shows up. And she pushed my friend James to the ground, and then she broke my arm!"

"And how exactly did this happen?" asked Callahan. "Was there an argument or…?"

"No! She just came out of the woods and she snapped my arm!"

Christine perked up in her seat, and did her best not to make it look like she was listening.

"Okay, okay," said Callahan, writing in his notebook. "So…So you were playing with your friend, and you say a…little girl just…came out of nowhere and snapped your arm clean in two?"

"Officer," the mother snapped. "You will *not* speak to my son like that!"

"Like what? Like I'm repeating what he's saying?"

"Don't act innocent with me! You are insulting him!"

"Woah, now—hey! I am not being insulting. If a tiny girl broke his arm…"

"Officer!"

"Ma'am," said Officer Powell, stepping into the conversation. "My partner just needs to get the details of the incident so he can file the report. It's procedure to repeat…"

"Oh, it's procedure to *mock* the citizens of Hawkins when they ask for help?" she demanded. "It's procedure to laugh at young boys who've

been the victim of a crime?"

"Hey, who is laughing?" Callahan asked. "I'm not laughing. He's not laughing. We're just…"

Christine watched the situation devolve comically. She wondered if Callahan was the newest officer to the squad. He certainly seemed it. He was spectacularly bad at his job.

"I want an apology!" the mother demanded, her voice getting louder by the second.

"An apology for what, exactly?"

"Where is the chief? I want to speak to him. Right this instant!"

"Ma'am, I need you to calm down…"

"What is your name, Deputy?"

"Well…I'm an officer, okay?" he said with a laugh, which did not do anything to deescalate the situation.

"Name and badge number, both of you!"

"What the hell is going on here?"

Chief Hopper had returned, bellowing the room into order as he bee-lined for the problem woman. Christine peeked behind him, but neither Nancy nor Jonathan was in sight.

"These men are *humiliating* my son!" the mother cried, pushing her son forward like some kind of proof.

"No, no, no," said Callahan quickly. "Okay, that's not true!"

"Yes!"

"There was some kind of fight, Chief," Powell started, only to be interrupted again.

"A psychotic child broke his arm!"

"A little girl, Chief," Callahan supplied. "A little one."

"That tone!" the mother screeched, jabbing painted nail at him. "Do you hear that tone?"

"Honestly, I'm just trying to state a fact! It was a little girl…"

"I don't have time for this," Chief Hopper groaned. "Will you please take a statement and…"

He mouthed the last few words, gesturing sweepingly toward the door. Callahan and Powell nodded dutifully.

"So what did this girl look like?" Powell asked.

"She had no hair," the boy gushed, "and she was bleeding from her nose. Like a freak!"

Christine froze. It was all the confirmation she could have hoped for. Eleven was out there, somewhere, still alive and powerful and kicking. What the boy had done to upset her, Christine couldn't imagine. But she already felt less sympathetic. He must've been a real asshole.

What surprised her was that she wasn't the only one who'd stopped. Chief Hopper had paused halfway to his office. He turned on the spot, looking like he'd seen a ghost.

"What'd you just say?"

"I said she's a freak," the boy repeated.

"No, her hair." He hurried back over, staring intently at the kid. "What'd you say about her hair?"

"Her head's shaved. She doesn't even look like a girl. And…"

"And what?" the chief prompted.

It was clear that whatever was supposed to come next was not going to sound great. The kid stared anxiously at the floor until his mother rubbed his shoulder.

"Tell the man, Troy."

Troy hesitated a moment longer, then looked up to Hopper. "She can…do things."

"What kind of things?"

"Like…make you fly…and piss yourself…"

"What?" asked Powell, obviously filled with glee, but the Chief held up a hand.

"Was she alone?" he asked fervently.

"No," the boy answered. "She always hangs out with those losers."

"Losers?"

Christine had asked it at the same time as Hopper, her tone accusatory while he remained confused. She clamped her mouth shut, praying that no one had noticed. But as tired as Hopper looked, he was definitely sharper than people gave him credit for.

"Hey." Hopper was bearing down on her now. "Do you know who he's talking about?"

"No," she said too quickly. "I just…you know, rich for a kid to call someone else a loser when his arm got broken by a girl."

"Young lady!" Troy's mother gasped. "Chief Hopper, I expect to see some disciplinary…"

"Absolutely," Hopper agreed, though his eyes never left Christine. "Let's go, Blondie. My office. Now."

He grabbed her by the arm, wrenching her out of her chair and dragging her down the hall before she could so much as yelp. He dragged her past Jonathan and his mother, who were waiting anxiously in the hallway. He dragged her right into the office and tossed her into an empty armchair across from Nancy. He barely waited for the Byers to reenter the room before he rounded on her.

"Where is she?" he demanded. One hand on either arm of the chair, he leaned into her face, making her shrink back. "Huh? Where is she?"

"Where is *who?"* Christine asked.

"Hopper!" Mrs. Byers' tone was scolding, and she quickly closed the door to the office. "What the hell are you doing?"

Chief Hopper didn't spare her a thought.

"Where is she?" he asked again, slamming his hands onto the chair. "I know you know where she is. Who do you work for, huh? Who is it?"

"I don't know!"

"She doesn't work for anyone!" Nancy jumped out of her seat. She stood at Hopper's back, pleading but also too afraid to attempt to pull him back. "Just stop! Please!"

Mrs. Byers was the only one brave enough to step between them. She shoved him back, her hands shaking, but her arms firm.

"Seriously, Hop! Stop it! She's—She's just a kid!"

"You know that for sure?" he asked challengingly. "You know her?"

"Yes! Of course I know her! Her name is Christine! She's a damn babysitter, Hop! Now what the hell is going on?"

Mrs. Byers' testimony seemed to be enough for him. He sagged back against the couch, collapsing onto the arm and grabbing the coat rack for support. He waved a hand at Christine, which she supposed was supposed to reassure her. Surprisingly, after being dragged and cornered and screamed at, it wasn't much of a comfort.

"She knows," he said shakily, wiping one hand down his face while the other one pointed at Christine. "She knows something."

"No, she doesn't," said Jonathan. "Trust me, if she did, we wouldn't have ended up here!"

"She doesn't know anything," Nancy agreed. "Please, just—can we leave her out of it?"

"Out of what?" Christine ask, though no one seemed to be paying attention.

"No," Hopped said confidently. "She knows. She knows where Jane is."

This did not seem to make much sense to Jonathan and Nancy. They only shrugged, and exchanged a dubious look. Mrs. Byers, however, went stock still.

"Jane?" she asked, her voice trembling.

"Who is Jane?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah," Christine added. "Who the hell is Jane?"

Hopper didn't seem amused or convinced by her confusion. He stormed to his desk, sifting through several piles of paper before he found the one that he was looking for. He grabbed a copy and thrust it into Christine's lap with finality.

"That! That is Jane!"

Christine faltered, but looked down at the page he'd handed her. It was a newspaper clipping from over a decade ago, probably copied from the microfilm at the public library. The title read "Terry Ives Suing," accompanied by a picture of a pretty woman with long, dark hair. Christine scanned the article as quickly as she could.

"After the district attorney's office declined to press criminal charges citing lack of evidence, local resident Terry Ives is not giving up her search for justice for her and her daughter, and this morning filed a lawsuit against research scientist Dr. Martin Brenner and his staff.

"Ms. Ives suit seeks unspecified damages against Dr. Brenner and his faculty, alleging physical abuse, sleep deprivation, malnourishment, and kidnapping…"

The article went on, describing the woman's claims against Hawkins

Laboratory—that she'd undergone psychedelic tests under false pretenses, that she'd given birth to a child with enhanced abilities, that the scientists of the lab had taken the child hostage and attempted to erase the circumstances of her birth. The journalist writing clearly thought she was insane, but did their best to remain impartial.

But Christine's blood ran cold at the mention of a child with psychokinetic powers. Her eyes flicked between the words Hawkins Lab, Jane Ives, and Dr. Brenner. She did her best to hide her concern under the shocked hand she placed over her face as she read.

"This is what you're concerned about?" Jonathan asked angrily. He'd moved behind her chair, reading over her shoulder. "Will is out there—and Barb—lost or—or trapped, and you're worried about finding some other kid?"

"Yeah, I am," Hopper said tersely. "Cause this *kid* is the key to everything. It's all connected. You've gotta see that by now."

Jonathan shook his head, nonplussed. Nancy didn't seem to be much further along. So Hopper huffed, and glared back at Christine.

"Do you want to tell them, or should I?"

Christine kept her mouth shut tight.

"Fine. I'll go first."

He grabbed the paper out of her hands, and walked back to lean on the edge of his desk. He held the article up for them, tapping the last paragraph.

"This Hawkins Lab? It's run by the Department of Energy, right on the edge of town, around Randolph Road. Now, I went down there when Will first went missing. Figured maybe he ran, got through the fence, went to go hide inside. I didn't find Will, but when those folks showed me their security tapes, they were faked."

"Faked?" Nancy repeated in shock. "What? W-Why?"

"Well, I didn't know. Just that they were hiding something. So I went

looking into it, found these articles. We didn't get much further at the time, cause that was when we found Will's body."

"Which—Which *wasn't* Will's body," Mrs. Byers added firmly. "Which wasn't *anybody's* body."

"What was it?" Jonathan asked. "I mean, we went to the morgue. I saw it. We saw Will."

"From a distance," Hopper corrected. "You saw him from a distance, because they didn't want you to get too close."

"To what?"

"To the fake. Now, when they found Will's body, it was called in by a State Trooper—guy named O'Bannon. I went to see him, and he said that someone told him to go to the quarry, and not to let anyone get close to the body. Then when we brought the body in, some State doctors kicked out Gary Tranden and did the autopsy themselves. When I went to check it out, he was still being guarded by Troopers."

"They had State Troops guarding Will's body?" Jonathan asked incredulously.

"Yeah. Cause it wasn't a body. It was stuffed rubber, made up by some specialist to look like your brother."

"But why?" Nancy asked. "Why go through to trouble to make a fake body?"

"Exactly," Hopper said, jabbing a finger at her. "Unless you know what really happened, and you don't want anyone looking into it."

A chill went around the room as that thought sank in. Whatever was going on was bigger than they could have imagined. It was cover-up big, conspiracy big, government big. Christine was starting to understand why Eleven was so afraid of her home. If she'd come from a government lab, then the "bad men" who were after her certainly did have eyes everywhere, just like she'd said. They'd been pulling the strings the whole time, and no one had noticed. It was a miracle she hadn't already been found.

Still, Christine kept her mouth shut.

"So you're telling me," said Nancy, with a wary look to Christine, "that…everything that's happened. This…*thing*, and Will and Barbara…the government knows about it?"

"Yeah," the chief confirmed.

"And…they're not doing anything to stop it? They're just letting it happen? Letting them die?"

"Yeah," he said again. His jaw was set with determination. "But we're not."

"It's the government," Jonathan said despairingly. "What are we gonna do about it?"

"We're gonna find what they're looking for. Before they do."

"What are they looking for?" asked Nancy.

Hopper raised the article again. "Jane."

"We still don't know everything," Mrs. Byers explained. "But Hop and I have been looking into this—this girl. Her mother went through all these trials, these isolation tanks and drug testing, and she said that it gave her baby special…I don't know, special abilities. And the lab *took* her daughter. They just *took* her and—and covered it up."

"Like Will," Hopper agreed. "Now, when he first went missing, I was following all these dead end leads. There was a kid at the lab, and a kid out at Benny's, and I thought it was Will. But I don't think the lab was lying about Will getting in. I think they were hiding that Jane had gotten out."

"And, she's…what?" asked Nancy skeptically. "A psychic or something?"

"Yeah, or something. I don't know a lot more than that. But I think someone here does."

Everyone turned back to look at Christine.

Never in her life had it been so clear that she was in over her head. The boys had been right. Eleven had been right. There were bad men with guns, and a monster on the loose, and the bad men were trying to capture Eleven and keep it all quiet. The government knew about everything. Everything fit into place.

Hopper stared at her intently, willing for her to break. But if there was anything his story had taught her, it was just how dangerous the bad men were. And Christine was not going to let Eleven down.

"Look," she sighed, shaking her head. "This is all…insane. Completely. And it sounds really serious and really scary, but…I don't know what you're talking about."

"Then why did you look up?" Hopper demanded. "Hm? Some kid comes walking in talking about a girl with psychic powers and you lit up like a Christmas tree. Why?"

"Uh, cause it's ridiculous?" she said with a laugh. "He's a punk ass middle schooler who doesn't want to admit he lost a fight to a girl."

"And the losers? What about them?"

Christine huffed. "Okay, so I know who Troy is. He's a middle school kid, and he bullies my neighbor Dustin. All his friends. So I'm a little protective—sue me. I'm not part of some grand cover-up."

Chief Hopper deflated. He sank back against his desk, purposely knocking over a cup of pens in his frustration. Mrs. Byers looked dispirited too. It broke Christine's heart to see her so hopeless, just like she'd been at the funeral. But she was going to stand her ground. She wasn't going to let anyone get to Eleven. She wasn't going to let anyone use Eleven. She wasn't a weapon, or a bargaining chip, or a lynch pin in a conspiracy case. She was just a scared kid. And Christine had made a promise to keep her safe.

She thought she was going to get away with it. Until Nancy opened her mouth.

"She's lying."

"Excuse me?" Christine's jaw dropped. "Says who?"

"Says your hands," said Nancy. Her tone wasn't accusatory. She seemed more shocked than anything, but she was confident. "You've been my best friend for five years, Chrissy. I know you pick your nails when you lie."

"Well, I also pick my nails when I'm nervous," Christine growled. "You know, like when I'm being accused of harboring a telekinetic child fugitive."

But Nancy wasn't having any of her excuses.

"Is this the real reason you've been missing so much school?" she asked in surprise. "Is this why you were at the quarry with my brother?"

"No!"

"The quarry?" Hopper's head shot up once more. "You were at the quarry? When? Today?"

"No," Nancy answered for her, "the night they found Will. Mike came running home crying about it before they were even on the news. Christine said she took them on a bike ride and they heard the sirens, but Mike said they'd been going to Will's house to bring over some of his drawings. I never thought to ask why he lied."

Damnit, Michael.

"He didn't lie," Christine amended, exasperated. "I took them on a joy ride after AV club, they had the bright idea to bring Will's mom some of his drawings, and we were on our way when we heard the sirens. Why is that so hard you to believe?"

"Because since when do you hang out with my brother?"

"Since kids were going missing and I lost my two best friends!"

"Okay," said Mrs. Byers. She shuffled between Christine and Nancy, holding up her hands. "That's enough, girls. Let's all just calm down."

This was mostly directed at Christine. Nancy still seemed calm in her shocking revelation. Christine was the one furious about being

dragging into an interrogation. She considered getting up and storming out, seeing how far she could make it without Hopper either tailing her or physically carrying her back to the office. But before she could decide, Mrs. Byers had knelt down in front of her.

"Christine," she said softly, resting her hands on top of Christine's knees. "I know that this is scary. And I know that you care about those boys. When…When you came over to talk to me at Will's funeral, I knew…gosh, I *knew* that you really cared. And I *knew* that there was something, something else you wanted to say. But you couldn't or—or you didn't know how. But Christine, if you know where Jane is…please…she's…she's the only chance I have of getting my son back…"

It was hard to look her in the eyes. Christine ended up closing her own so she didn't have to see her.

"I'm really sorry, Mrs. Byers. I…I can't help you."

Mrs. Byers' lip trembled. Jonathan was over in an instant, helping her up and hugging her to his chest. Christine hated to see it. She hated to be the bad guy. She knew that Mrs. Byers was hurting, but desperate people did crazy things. What if she tried to give Eleven back to the lab, in exchange for help finding Will? Christine couldn't let that happen. She wanted to save Will as much as anyone, but she wasn't going to let anyone trade Eleven in.

Hopper seemed to sense what she was thinking.

"Look, kid," he said, still gruff but softer than he had before. "I know that you're trying to protect her. Maybe you think hiding her is the best chance she's got. And you've done good so far. I'll give you that. You kids have to be damn smart if they haven't found you yet. But this is the United States government we're talking about. This is the Army. These are soldiers and scientists who have complete control over this town, so I need you to believe me when I say that it is only a matter of time until they find her."

He got off of his desk, grabbing a different article and placing it into her lap. He squatted down next to the chair, and tapped the picture. It showed a group of people in hospital gowns, all thin with sunken

eyes. There was a doctor on the right, standing tall and proud. Dr. Brenner, if she had to guess. He wasn't scared like he patients. He even looked happy.

"I've been inside this lab," Hopper said softly. "I've seen where they were keeping her. Tiny room with no windows, one lamp, one bed. I know what living like that does to a person. I know the kinds of things they do in places like that. And I promise you, I am not gonna let any kid go back to a prison like that. But you gotta give me something. Cause if we don't get to her first, that's exactly what's gonna happen. You can't do this alone."

Christine stared down at the picture. She knew Hopper was right. There was no way she could protect Eleven alone. What was she going to do? Stand between Eleven and the entire US government with three twelve-year-olds and a rusty hammer? Keep Eleven locked in her room and hope her dad never went in to clean it? She didn't even know where Eleven was. Just that she'd been with the boys at the quarry. And it felt like time was running out.

She didn't want to break her promise. She didn't like the idea of telling anyone about Eleven, let alone a cop. There was no way for her to know if he was telling the truth, or if Hopper was just another state plant trying to find Eleven for himself. Christine didn't know how Jonathan and Nancy were involved, but Joyce Byers…that was something else. She was a mother. If anyone could have compassion for a scared and abused kid, it was a mother who'd lost her son. If Joyce Byers was going up against the government to get her son back, she needed all the help she could get. And so did Christine.

"I don't know anyone named Jane," she said, passing the article back to Hopper. "We just call her Eleven."

18. Fifteen Digits of Pi

"So this is the Demogorgon."

They were all squeezed into Jonathan's car, Hopper and Mrs. Byers up front while Christine, Nancy and Jonathan sat in the back. They were mostly sitting, anyway. Christine had half her butt on the door, and Nancy's hips were angled so she wouldn't have to be in Jonathan's lap. It was a tight fit, but they were trying to make it work.

Christine was more focused on the photo in her hands. It was mostly black, looking more like a distortion than anything concrete. But Nancy had traced out the figure with her finger—arms, legs, broad torso, a head that didn't seem to have a face. It loomed nearly seven feet tall, illuminated underneath by the eerie light of Steve's pool. It was right at the end of the diving board, right behind where Barb had been sitting…

She was relieved Barb had been cropped out of this copy. Christine wasn't sure if she could handle seeing it right now.

"The demo-what?" Nancy asked.

"It's uh…that's what me and the boys have been calling it," Christine said sheepishly. "I think it's from Dungeons and Dragons."

"Seriously?" Jonathan snorted from the other side of the car. "You're using a kids' game to name a bloodthirsty monster?"

"So what? It's so much more elegant to keep calling it 'that thing'? Besides, this whole thing—monsters and alternate dimensions and superpowers—kinda feels like Dungeons and Dragons to me."

"Do not say 'alternate dimensions'," Hopper instructed flatly from the drivers' seat. "I don't know what we're up against, but I don't want to hear you talking about 'alternate dimensions' ever again."

Christine raised a hand in surrender. He hadn't taken well to her explanation of the multiverse. Government conspiracies were fine,

but apparently theoretical physics was right out.

"I still can't believe you've been with my brother this whole time," Nancy said. "That's…so weird."

"Yeah, and you've been fighting demons," Christine offered, handing her the picture once more. "Cause that's not insane."

Nancy laughed weakly. "Yeah, well…I guess neither of our weeks went that great."

Christine nodded. She'd only gotten the short version on Jonathan and Nancy's side of things. They'd glossed over the pictures, but it seemed like Nancy was overlooking the creepiness since it'd helped her figure out what happened to Barb. They'd gone looking for the Demogorgon after the funeral, running around in the same woods where Christine had been looking for Eleven. But while Christine was avoiding trouble, Nancy had run right into it—and into the Upside Down, from the sounds of it.

Nancy's description had been short. It was darker, but familiar. Cold and wet and slimy. She'd nearly gotten lost trying to escape the Demogorgon. That she hardly described at all. She just handed Christine the photo and let the picture do the talking.

Jonathan had managed to pull her out, and stayed the night so Nancy would feel safer. But they hadn't slept together. Nancy hadn't even slept at all. So Steve had seen them comforting each other—but it had Jonathan helping Nancy, and not the other way around.

Christine didn't have any words of comfort. She couldn't think of any that matched the gravity of the whole thing. They'd each been alone, thinking the other one didn't care, thinking their friend had ditched them over some boy when they were just trying not to die. She couldn't imagine what Nancy had been through in the Upside Down. And she didn't have any adequate way to apologize.

As Hopper sped through the suburban streets, Christine slipped her hand into Nancy's and squeezed. She had no idea when they'd get a real chance to talk. But at least they wouldn't go through the rest of it alone.

The car swerved to a quick stop, forcing everyone to jolt forward in their seats.

"Tell me that's not your house," said Hopper darkly.

Christine leaned around him to peer out the windshield. They'd pulled over on the side of the street, at least ten houses down from her own. She couldn't see what the big deal was at first. But then she noticed the large white van parked next door. The side read Hawkins Power and Light. There was a man in a suit standing at the front door, talking to a confused looking Claudia.

"Okay," said Christine. "That's not my house. It's Dustin's. How the hell do they know about Dustin?"

"They're the government. They know about everyone."

"Well, could she still be inside?" asked Mrs. Byers. "Just because they know about the boys doesn't mean they know about Christine."

"Yeah, I think they know about Christine," said Hopper, and he nodded out the window again.

Everyone looked out, closer this time. It was faint, but Christine could see the shadows moving inside her house, shadows that were too big to be anyone in the party. Though she knew Eleven wouldn't be inside, her stomach clenched. This was not good.

"Are they allowed to be in there?" asked Nancy. "Isn't that like… breaking and entering?"

"Not if you're the government," said Hopper. "All they need to say is that they had probable cause and an unlocked door."

"They did have an unlocked door."

Hopper turned around in his seat to stare at Christine. "You keep the doors unlocked?"

"What?" she said defensively. "I wanted to make sure Eleven could get in if she came home."

"The girl has superpowers, and you thought a locked door was going to stop her?"

"What does it matter? They were just gonna break my door down anyway!"

"Jesus…" He shook his head, and looked back to the house. "Okay, if the safe house is out, where else might the kids go to hide?"

"Well, she was living with the Wheelers for a few days."

"What?" gasped Nancy.

"Yeah," said Christine. "She was living in your basement. I think Mike took some of your clothes, by the way, so don't be surprised if your laundry's a little light."

"She's not at the Wheelers," Hopper interrupted. "If they know about one kid, they know about all of them."

"Then we have to go back," Nancy said stoutly. "My mom, my dad—what if they hurt my little sister?"

"We are not going back. The last thing your parents need is for these guys to find out you're involved in this too."

"But what if they have Mike?" she demanded. "What if he comes back and…?"

"If your brother came back to the house, he'd be smart enough to leave," Hopper assured her. "If they've made it this long, they know the drill. Besides. The lab doesn't have your brother."

"How can you know that?"

Hopper pointed out the window over Mrs. Byers' shoulder. The whole car creaked as everyone turned to see what he was looking at this time. Christine couldn't quite see it between Nancy, Jonathan and the houses outside, but in the bated silence she could hear it. Somewhere outside there was a heavy mechanical whirring. It sounded like helicopter blades.

"Seriously?" Worried as Nancy was, she still managed to sound annoyed. "For *Mike?"*

"For Eleven," Christine corrected with worry. "If they get Mike, it'll just be a bonus."

"Which is why we need to find them before they do," Hopper agreed. He twisted around in the seat to look at Christine. "I need you to think. Is there anywhere else they might have gone?"

"Not that I know of," Christine sighed.

"Then think harder!"

"Look, I told you everything I know, okay? She's been at Mike's house, my house, and briefly the middle school. Besides that it's just been the woods, and they could be anywhere in there. She knows them better than anyone else would. You'd have to ask her."

"So why don't we?"

Everyone turned to look at Jonathan, who was staring a hole into the back of his mother's seat.

"Why don't we what?" she asked.

"Ask her. I don't know where they are, but I think I know how to get in contact with them."

"The supercomms," Christine realized, turning to him. "But I don't have one. Do you?"

"No, but…"

"But Will does," Mrs. Byers finished. She smacked Hopper on the arm, making him flinch. "My house. Go, Hop! We have to get back to my house!"

Hopper grumbled as she continued to berate him into turning the car around. They couldn't go too fast. They didn't want to draw the attention of the several government agents who were currently dissecting Christine's house top to bottom. But as soon as they

rounded the corner and were out of sight, Hopper slammed on the gas. They went racing down the roads, whipping past Mirkwood and heading for the edge of town.

They all jolted forward again when Hopper slammed on the brakes, skidding into the Byers' driveway and sending gravel in every direction. Everyone piled out of the car, and Mrs. Byers led the way into the house without hesitation.

Christine marched behind her, but quickly trailed to a stop in the living room.

"Holy shit…"

The Byers' entire house had been done up for Christmas early. String lights hung like a net around the ceiling, creating a maze of wires. For some reason, all the bulbs had been removed and were rolling around the floor. Furniture had been upended and ripped open, papers covered the floor. There were several boards hap-hazardously nailed up in one corner, and over the couch someone had painted the alphabet in lopsided black letters. It looked like one bulb had been nailed over each letter, like some sort of creepy, festive keyboard.

"Whoa…" Nancy was standing next to her, looking equally as stunned. "Uh…Jonathan said that…she was talking to Will…through the lights…"

"Right," said Christine. Her eyes trailed back to the alphabet. "That… makes sense…"

They proceeded down the hall without saying anything else on the subject.

Will's room was at the opposite end of the house. It had also been strung up with Christmas lights, with a couple of open lamps here and there for variation. Christine felt weird about diving in and rifling through Will's stuff. Jonathan and his mom ended up doing most of the searching, while Christine, Nancy and Hopper waited anxiously by the door.

"I got it!" Mrs. Byers announced after a few minutes of looking. She

resurfaced from under the bed, raising the walkie over her head. "Oh. How do I…?"

Jonathan took the radio from her hand, checking the battery before powering it on and tuning the station. His finger hovered over the call button, and he paused.

"Actually, it's—it's probably better if you do it."

He held the radio out to Christine. She nodded, and took a deep breath before she grabbed it from him. Mrs. Byers ushered her to sit on the end of the bed, and everyone gathered around to listen.

"Hello?" Christine called into the radio. "Mike? Dustin? Lucas? This is Christine. Anyone copy?"

Silence.

"Hello? Anybody? This is Christine. I need you to pick up. It's an emergency. I said do you copy?"

Silence.

"I know at least one of you idiots has a radio on you. I'm serious, it's Christine. Hello, hello, hello, hello, helloooo?"

And again, silence.

Hopper grabbed the radio out of her hands, ignoring her noise of protest.

"Listen, kid, this is the chief. If you're there pick up."

"Chief, I don't think that's a good idea," Christine warned, which he also ignored.

"We know you're in trouble, and we know about the girl."

"Great," she huffed. "Well that's definitely not a good idea."

"We can protect you, we can help you, but you gotta pick up. Are you there? Do you copy? Over!"

Christine stood up, grabbing the walkie back from him. Seeing as he was a lot taller and stronger than she was, it was a challenge. But she managed it with a hearty glare.

"You're gonna scare the shit out of them," she snapped at him. "Every authority figure she's ever known has tortured her, and you wanna announce that you're a cop? I made a promise not to go to the police because she was too scared. Just let me talk to them."

Hopper glowered at her, but did not reach for the walkie.

Christine leaned back on the doorframe. She closed her eyes, and pressed the radio against her forehead.

"Come on, guys. It's Christine. I know you're worried about the bad men, but I'm here with reinforcements. I've got Chief Hopper and Mrs. Byers and Jonathan and…hell, even Nancy. You know I wouldn't have told anyone unless it was for a really good reason. But the bad men know who you are, so we have to find you guys if you want our help. Please…please pick up. Do you copy?"

More silence. She was ready to give up when the radio crackled to life.

"What are the first fifteen digits of pi?"

Christine actually laughed with relief.

"What?" Nancy asked, staring down at the radio. "What is it?"

"It's Dustin," Christine explained. "It's a defense thing."

"Defense?" Mrs. Byers repeated in confusion. "What, does—are they in trouble?"

"No, he wants to know if I am. It's a code we have. If you say it right, everything's okay, but if you say it wrong it means you're in distress."

"You memorized the first fifteen digits of pi?" Hopper asked, looking mildly disgusted.

"Christine? Hello? I asked for the first fifteen digits of pi. Do you copy?

Over!"

"Yeah, I copy, Dust," she said, turning back to the radio. "3.14159265358979."

"Thank God. And say over when you're done, geez. This is basic stuff. Over."

"My apologies. Are you all alive? Over."

"Yeah, we're okay. Had a close call, but we're all good on the fifteen digits of pi here. Over."

"Great. Now where the hell are you? Over."

"We can't tell you. Signal might be intercepted. Over."

"Fine," Christine sighed, knowing he had a point. "Can you…describe it to me? Give me a hint? Gimme something here. Over."

There was silence as the boys discussed the best way to proceed. It was minute or two before she got an answer.

"Christine, we are in Cloud City. Do you copy? Over."

"Cloud City?" Hopper echoed. "What is that, a place?"

"Yeah, but not a real one," said Christine. "It's from *Star Wars*."

The explanation only seemed to make him more exasperated.

"What is it with these kids and the made up places?"

"It's code," Jonathan urged. "We're supposed to figure it out. So what's so special about Cloud City?"

"Well it's in the sky, for one," Christine sighed. "It's a gas mining colony. It was under Imperial control."

"You don't think they're in the Lab, do you?" Joyce asked.

"No, no. That would definitely be the Death Star. But Cloud City is…" Christine chewed on her lip, and after a few more seconds, lit up with

recognition. She held the radio up again, asking, "Dustin, you said Cloud City? You are in the *ruins* of Cloud City, is that right? Over."

"Christine! Just say Cloud City! It's a damn code! Over!"

"Whatever! Fine. Yes, I copy. Just stay where you are. We're coming for you. Over."

"Okay. But be careful! And remember Ackbar's advice! Over!"

"Ten-four. Over and out."

"Where are they?" Mrs. Byers asked, as Christine put down the radio. "They're okay?"

"They're fine, for now. They're hiding in a junkyard on the edge of town."

"How'd you get that from Cloud City?" Nancy asked in bewilderment.

"Traitors," Christine explained. "We were at the junkyard yesterday after the funeral. It's where we were when Lucas realized El was messing with the compasses so we couldn't get to the gate. In *Empire Strikes Back*, it's where Han and Leia meet up with Lando, who turns out to…"

"We don't have time for this," Hopper interrupted. "You know how to get there?"

Christine frowned, admittedly a little annoyed. "Yeah."

"Good. Get in the car. No, not you!" Hopper held up a hand as everyone in the room made for the door. "Blondie comes for navigation. The rest of you stay here."

"Hopper," Joyce pleaded. "If the kids are…"

"You just heard the kids are fine. This is not up for discussion. Stay here, keep your heads down, and *wait."*

He did not allow room for argument as he walked out of the room.

Christine hesitated. After so long split up from Nancy, she suddenly didn't want to leave her again.

"I should go," she said awkwardly.

Nancy nodded. "Just be careful, okay? And…remember Ackbar's advice. Whatever that means."

They smiled at each other, and Christine rushed out the door.

Chief Hopper was waiting not all that patiently in the car. It was already running when she got in, and he was pulling out before she got her seatbelt on.

"It's a junkyard on the west end of town," she started to explain as he drove. "We got there by following the train tracks and cutting through the forest, but I think if you went up through Randolph Way…"

"One thing at a time," said Hopper, shutting her down. "First thing's first. We're going back to the station."

"What? Why?"

"So I can get my damn car. You see me driving five kids around in this piece of junk? I don't think so."

"What, you're worried we're gonna cramp your style?" Christine glared at him. "There are government agents out hunting them down! We don't have time to…"

"We have *time* to do whatever I say we do! We are getting. The police van. Besides, it gets us more clearance and less attention. They could've seen this car when we went to your house."

"Right," Christine said moodily. "Cause the Chief's car is so much more inconspicuous. Especially if they know you're onto them."

Hopper did not seem to appreciate her clear logic. He didn't yell at her, but he did take the next turn hard enough to slam her into the door. She grunted, and he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment.

"Just please do me a favor, kid," he said slowly, "and do not speak unless I ask you for directions. Please."

"…Christine."

"What?"

"My name is Christine Walcott," she repeated. "Not kid. And not Blondie."

Neither of them spoke for the rest of the drive.

Once they got to the station, Hopper disappeared inside for a few minutes for "supplies." Christine twitched anxiously in the car while she waited, checking the clock obsessively as more and more time slipped by. She was annoyed to find when he returned that "supplies" had meant some more bullets for his gun, a pack of cigarettes, and a cup of coffee. It was one of the reasons she didn't object when he handed her Jonathan's keys and went to his own car. He would follow her up to the junkyard, but she needed to stop at least a hundred yards away, just in case.

Regardless, there was already a pattern emerging. Hopper must have sensed it too. That was why he was out of his car with a hand on Christine's door before she could so much as turn the engine off.

"You are staying here," he instructed clearly. "Do you understand?"

"But…"

"They have guns, and you do not. I have a gun, and you do not. If things go south, I am going to tell the kids to run this way, and you will drive like hell to get them out of here. Nod if you understand."

Christine huffed, but nodded.

It made her tremblingly nauseous to watch Hopper pull out his gun. He checked his bullets, clicked off the safety, and secured the brimmed hat on his head. He nodded to her once, and then disappeared up over the hill. Her eyes stayed locked on the empty grass.

One Mississippi. Two Mississippi. Three Mississippi.

She counted slowly, probably slower than real seconds lasted. Christine wasn't sure why she was timing him. She wasn't even sure she was. She restarted every time she go to ten, and had forgotten how many times she'd started over. More than anything, it was to make sure she kept breathing. If she held her breath as long as her worries wanted her to, the kids wouldn't have a conscious getaway driver to help them.

Hopper's hat broke the surface of the horizon. He walked briskly back down the slope, caught her eye, and nodded once. Christine's heart jumped into her throat. A moment later, the kids began to spill over the hilltop.

Christine nearly tumbled out of the car in her rush to get to them. Dustin hit her first, breaking into a sprint and slamming his body into her arms. She rocked back and hugged him tight. He didn't seem to care that his hat had fallen off any more than she cared that his headset was jabbing her in the ribs. She was just relieved he was okay.

"Thank God," she said, trying to conceal the weight of her worry. "Your mom would've killed me if I let you get kidnapped by the government."

"Don't be stupid, Chrissy," he replied, the words muffled by her shirt. "They wouldn't have kidnapped us. We'd be dead."

"Thanks, Dust." She laughed, and her voice broke. "That's really comforting."

"Don't worry. Eleven wouldn't let that happen. There was this huge car chase, right? And we had four of those big vans after us! Three from the back, one from the front. And just when it looked like we were gonna be a double decker van-bike sandwich, Eleven *flips* the whole van over our heads! It was crazy! Aw, you shoulda been there!"

"Yeah…Yeah, I should've."

Dustin pulled back, rubbing his face where the buttons of her work uniform had left circles in his cheek. "It's okay. You came back."

Christine smiled and kissed him on top of the head. She did the same for Mike and Lucas as they came running up next. Mike wrinkled his nose and batted her away, while Lucas stammered and blushed.

"You guys okay?" she asked.

"Uh, y-yeah," said Lucas, nodding frantically. "We're cool. We're—We're good."

"Is Nancy okay?" Mike asked nervously.

"Yeah, she's fine. She's waiting back at the house."

"Who's house? And how does she know about this anyway?"

"I'll explain on the way. Where's…?"

"Chrissy?"

Eleven was finally standing at the bottom of the hill. She was still wearing her tube socks, her blue jacket, her pink dress—only now they were dingy and covered with dirt. It was covered her face too, clumsily washed off but still leaving her ashen. Her wig was long gone, but the same big, brown eyes stared up at her, overflowing with relief.

"Oh, thank God."

Christine pushed right past Dustin. She rushed over to Eleven and dropped down to her knees, pulling her into a fierce hug. It took Eleven a few seconds to respond. But slowly her arms came up, and she wrapped them around Christine just as tightly. Christine ran a hand over Eleven's head, and pressed her face into her dress. One of them was shaking, but she couldn't be sure which one. So she was extra careful to keep her eyes dry when she pulled back.

"Are you okay?" she asked Eleven. "Are you hurt?"

Eleven shook her head, wiping her eyes.

"I was so worried. When you didn't come back, I… Why did you run?"

"I…hurt Lucas," she said haltingly. "I'm sorry."

"Hey, hey, it's okay, El," Christine assured her. She held Eleven's face in her hands, and ran a thumb over her cheek. "It was an accident. And if half of what Dustin says is true, it sounds like you've more than made up for it. I'm…I'm glad you're back."

She smiled, and Eleven mirrored the action. "Me too."

Hopper cleared his throat behind them, looking awkward.

"Not to break up the reunion speeches, but I had to knock out three agents in the junkyard, so. Can we maybe get a move on before they wake up?"

"Yeah," Christine agreed, standing once more. "Yeah, good idea."

"Thanks." Hopper headed back to his van, waving a hand over his shoulder. "Everyone jump in. Wheeler in shotgun, the rest of you in the back. And all of you keep your heads down. The last thing we need is for one of you to be seen."

He swung the back door open, and turned around to find he was talking to empty air. The children had all piled into the crappy Ford, their babysitter ringleader in the front. She started the car up and pulled into a U-turn. Pulling up alongside him, she rolled down her window.

"Coming, Chief?"

She smiled, which was annoying. What was worse was the way every kid in the car grinned with her, the girl in the passenger seat and the three boys stuffed in the back. He knew there wasn't enough time on the clock to argue, but he sure would've liked to.

"Just keep your heads down," he grumbled. "And don't get shot."

The curly haired one gave him a salute, and they all slid down in their seats as Christine pulled onto the road. Hopper slammed the back door shut and climbed into the driver seat. He preferred a

hangover to kids these days.

19. Trial and Error

It was dark by the time they returned to the Byers. Nancy, Jonathan and his mother all came running out of the house the moment Christine pulled in the driveway. She politely ignored Mike's sigh of relief when he saw his sister. He didn't like to show it, but she knew he'd been really worried about Nancy. Especially when Christine had refused to give him more than the basic details of her involvement.

They all climbed out of the car, and Mike allowed himself to be pulled into a hug by a frantic Nancy.

"Oh my God, Mike." She squeezed him hard, then pulled him back at arms' length. "I was so worried about you!"

"Yeah," Mike said uncertainly. "Uh…me too?"

The chief pulled up behind them, killing his own engine and climbing out of the car. Slowly, everyone's attention shifted from Mike to Eleven. She was holding Christine's hand, and shrunk a little closer to her side as everyone stared at her. Christine squeezed her gently and gave Mike a pointed look. She'd let him do the honors.

"Right," he said, clearing his throat. "Everyone, this is Eleven. El for short. El, this is Chief Hopper, and this is my sister Nancy, and this is Jonathan and Mrs. Byers. They're Will's family."

Everyone on the porch smiled uncertainly, and Nancy lifted her hand in an awkward wave. Eleven lifted her hand as well, just as unsure.

"Joyce," Hopper prompted after they'd stood there for a few seconds. He spun a finger in the air. "Can we…?"

"Oh, yes." Mrs. Byers opened the front door again, waving everyone inside. "Come in, come in."

It was certainly a ragtag bunch that piled into the house. Christine kept a firm hold of Eleven's hand, though she felt it relax slightly as they crossed the threshold. Eleven, like the rest of the kids, was staring up in awe at the Christmas lights.

"I love the Christmas decorations, Mrs. Byers," Dustin said brightly, grinning up at the ceiling.

"Hm? Oh…well, actually they're for…"

"Talking to Will," Lucas finished with a nod. "We know. Chrissy was explaining in the car."

"I just think they look neat," said Dustin. "You should leave them like this."

Mrs. Byers gave him a warm but bewildered smile. "Oh…well, thank you, Dustin."

They spent the next few minutes trying to clear enough space to sit in the living room. Broken tables needed to be moved, extra chairs brought in, nails and wood and hammers cleared out of the way. They were finally able to gather around the Byers' coffee table, most of the kids sitting on the floor. A bowl of stale pretzels sat in the middle. Mrs. Byers had insisted on trying to get them to eat.

"So," started Jonathan, as they all exchanged quiet looks. "Who goes first?"

"I guess we should go first," said Mike, who was sitting on Eleven's other side. "So we can explain everything that's been happening for you."

"So you can explain?" Hopper repeated skeptically.

"Yeah. It all started last Monday, when we found out Will was missing. Dustin, Lucas and I broke curfew so we could go out looking for Will. That's when we found Eleven and…"

"And you brought her back to our house," said Nancy. "Yeah, Mike. We know."

Mike's face felt, and Lucas stepped in.

"What about El's powers? Do you know how she contacts Will? Or how she threw me across…?"

"Accidentally threw you across the junkyard with her mind," said Jonathan. "Yeah, Christine told us."

"Do you know about the flea and the tightrope?" asked Dustin.

"Yes," Mrs. Byers said with a nod. "And the…the, uh Upside Down? Yeah, Christine explained all of that to us."

"She tried to, anyway," Hopper grumbled.

Mike glared at Christine. "Did you seriously tell them everything?"

"Sorry," she said in amusement. "You guys were out running from bad guys and flipping vans. I had to make myself useful somehow."

"Fine." He deflated, and folded his arms on the table. "I guess someone else can go first then."

And so it started from the top. Mrs. Byers explained how she'd been using the lights to talk to her son, the mysterious phone calls she'd gotten, and the two times she'd seen the Demogorgon. Nancy talked about seeing it in Steve's backyard, and how she and Jonathan had tried to hunt it after the funeral. Chief Hopper explained how he'd managed to push both Nancy and Christine into talking, and how Hawkins Lab already knew he was on their tails. He did not mention Terry Ives, or her daughter, or the lawsuit. Christine was thankful he didn't. It would have been a lot to process in one conversation.

"So just to recap," said Hopper, with his permanent air of annoyance. "We think that Will and Barbara Holland are trapped in some kind of alternate dimension."

"The Upside Down," Mike confirmed.

"Right. And they were dragged there by this creature…"

"The Demogorgon," said Dustin.

"Uh huh. And it lives in this…again. Alternate dimension."

"Pretty much," said Lucas.

"But it has to come to Hawkins to hunt," added Nancy. "That…other place…"

"The Upside Down," Christine repeated.

"Fine. The Upside Down. It's empty. I don't know what else lives there that it can hunt. I think…I think that's why it took Barb and Will."

Mrs. Byers shuddered, and Jonathan took her hand. "But the Upside Down is a completely different dimension, right? So it's big and… there's plenty of places for them to hide."

"That's what I told him to do," Mrs. Byers agreed, nodding weakly. "When I saw him in the wall, I told him—I told him to run, and go hide."

"Okay," said Hopper. "And the only way to get into…the Upside Down, is through this gate?"

"Yes," said Mike. "Mr. Clarke said it's probably a rip in time and space."

"Which we tracked to Hawkins Lab," said Lucas.

"With our compasses," added Dustin.

Mrs. Byers raised her hand. "I'm…still a little confused about that? How exactly did you *track* it?"

"Okay, so the gate has a really strong electromagnetic field," Dustin gushed, "and that can change the direction of a compass's needle. It's really cool. Christine can show you how…"

"Yeah, maybe another time," Hopper cut him off. "The gate in the lab. Is it underground?"

"Yes," said Eleven quietly, speaking up for the first time.

Hopper stared at her thoughtfully. "Near a large water tank?"

Eleven nodded again. "Yes."

"H-How did you know all that?" Dustin asked.

"He's been there," Christine explained. "But it's gonna be tough to get in again. And it's not the only way."

"It's—It's not?" asked Mrs. Byers, and everyone turned to Christine in confusion.

"It can't be. Will went missing somewhere between here and Mirkwood, and Barb went missing in Steve's backyard. Nancy saw the Upside Down and she was out in the woods, too. That's miles from the lab. Which means the Demogorgon is really the flea. It can jump between dimensions on its own. Wherever the Demogorgon appears, there's a portal there too."

"Great, let me rephrase," Hopper said shortly. "The only *sane* way into the Upside Down is through the gate at Hawkins Laboratory."

"I'm just saying…"

"Either way," Jonathan interrupted. "If we find a way into the Upside Down, we still need to find Will. We don't know where he's hiding."

Mrs. Byers leaned forward again, looking pleadingly at Eleven. "Is there any way that you could—that you could reach Will? That you could talk to him in…in this…?"

"The Upside Down."

"…down, yeah."

Slowly, Eleven nodded.

"And our friend Barbara," Nancy added. "Can you find her, too?"

Eleven shared a nervous look with Christine, but nodded again. "Try."

"That's all you can do," Christine said encouragingly. "Come on."

She helped Eleven to her feet, and everyone else followed suit, following into the kitchen.

"How does this work, exactly?" Hopper asked, his arms folded across his chest. "What does she need?"

"Will's radio," said Christine, and Jonathan was dashing down the hall the next second. "And it helps if she has a picture."

"Okay, hold on," Mrs. Byers said quickly, and darted after her son.

Nancy vanished for a moment too, coming back with a beaten up photo from her bag. Hesitantly, she handed it to Christine.

She'd known in theory what it was going to be. But it didn't make it any easier to look at. It was one of the photos Jonathan had taken behind Steve's house. There was the shadowy figure of the Demogorgon, lurking next to the pool. And sitting on the diving board was Barbara. She'd taken off her shoes and rolled up her pants so her feet could dangle in the water. She stared into its depths, looking downcast and dejected. Christine could still make out the blood-soaked towel around her hand.

Her heart clenched, struggling with too many emotions. She was worried. Worried that this wasn't going to work, that they'd get to Barb too late. And she hated herself. If she and Nancy hadn't been fighting, if she hadn't gone to that stupid party, maybe Barb wouldn't have gotten hurt. The longer she stared at the picture, the longer the list got. If Nancy hadn't gone upstairs. If Christine hadn't been drunk. If Jonathan had tried to help instead of taking these stupid fucking pictures…

"Uh…here you go."

Jonathan was back, offering her Will's supercomm. His eyes lingered on the photo in her hands. He seemed to be having trouble meeting her eyes.

"Yeah," Christine said tersely. "Thanks."

She took the radio and focused on Eleven instead. She got the girl comfortable and set up at the kitchen table. Her supplies were laid out in front of her—radio, Barb's picture, and an old school picture of Will Mrs. Byers had unearthed from her room. Everyone was starting

to gather round, but Eleven still looked nervous.

"Hey." Christine squatted next to her, a hand on her knee. "You just have to try, okay? I know it's a lot of people, but no one's gonna be mad. They're just worried, and they'd really like your help."

Eleven nodded uncertainly. When she closed her eyes, she left one of her hands on top of Christine's.

Mike flicked the radio to life, and they all waited quietly. Static filled the room. It was steady at first. Then it began to shake. Eleven scanned through channels in her mind, and garbled fragments escaped out through the walkie. Clips of songs, subdued voices, unearthly noises that none of them could place. But nothing that sounded like Will or Barb.

Christine didn't want to look at the clock. Her legs were starting to ache from squatting, but she feared if she moved it would break El's concentration. It felt longer than last time. Longer than the stereo at her house, longer than the Heathkit at the middle school. She couldn't hear anything that she recognized.

The dining room light flickered and went out. A moment later it sputtered back to life, and Eleven opened her eyes. It took her a few seconds to speak. Christine didn't like the hollow look in her eyes.

"I'm sorry," she whispered.

"W-What?" Mrs. Byers was shaking, her hand still clinging to Jonathan's over her shoulder. "What's wrong? What—What happened?"

"I can't find them…"

It was not a good reaction. Mrs. Byers raised a worried hand over her mouth, and Jonathan left the room altogether. Nancy looked on the verge of tears. Chief Hopper might have had a better poker face, but Christine knew he was already starting to prepare for the worst.

"It's okay, El," Christine assured her, wrapping an arm around her should. "It's okay. You tried. Mike? Can you help me get her to the bathroom?"

Mike jumped out of his seat and hurried around to Eleven's other side. Together, they eased her out of the chair and ushered her down the hallway. There wasn't anything in the bathroom that would help, but it was better than sitting in front of all those confused and disappointed eyes.

Christine turned to the sink while Mike helped Eleven sit on the toilet. He knelt down in front of her and held one of her hands. Christine quickly busied herself with a washcloth.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked El softly.

"Yes. I…I'm sorry."

"No," he said quickly. "No, you—you don't have to be sorry. You did a lot today. You're probably just tired. We can try later."

"…disappoint?"

"No! I mean…we're just worried about Will. But you didn't disappoint anyone. I bet when you show them later, everyone's gonna lose their minds. They're gonna think you're so cool. Promise."

"Promise?" Eleven repeated meekly.

"Yeah. I know they will, because you're…you're awesome…"

Christine turned off the sink, giving Mike a knowing look. He was too panicked to look annoyed, and quickly let go of Eleven's hand.

"I'm uh…I'm gonna go tell everyone you're okay."

He hurriedly escaped into the hallway. Christine didn't bother to hide her grin as she took his spot at Eleven's knees. She sat on the edge of the bathtub, handing over the washcloth.

"See?" she said softly. "I told you. You're his favorite."

That got a tiny smile out of her. Eleven took the washcloth, running it repeatedly over her face. She did it more than once. More than she needed to in order to freshen up, or to wipe the remaining dirt off her face. It wasn't until Christine heard her sniffle that she realized

Eleven was doing everything she could to hide the fact that she was crying.

Christine got up, closing the door and hurrying back to Eleven.

"Hey, it's okay," she coaxed, rubbing her knee again. "It's okay. You can cry if you need to. No one's mad, Eleven. It's okay."

Eleven lowered the washcloth, revealing her red, tear-stained face. It broke Christine's heart, and she quickly pulled Eleven into another hug. El's hands gripped tightly at the back of the stiff button down, and she sobbed into Christine's shoulder. Christine wished there was something more helpful she could say than "it's okay" and "no one's mad." But that's all she could think of as she stroked the girl's shaking back. After enough time, the sobs started to space out, and her body grew still once more.

Christine reached up to the sink without moving from the floor. She wet the washcloth again, and gently wiped the tears from Eleven's face.

"Okay. There you go. You feel better?"

"Weak."

"That's okay. Crying makes me feel weak too. It's exhausting. But you've used a lot of energy today. Running around, trying to find Will, flipping cars. And I know you broke a kid's arm earlier. I'm sure he deserved it, but you'll definitely have to tell me more about that later."

"No." Eleven shook her head, still frowning. "Crying. Weak."

Christine paused. She shouldn't have been surprised. Not after knowing where Eleven came from, the way she was raised as a science experiment and given a number for a name. But it still filled her with righteous anger.

She put the washcloth aside, taking both of Eleven's hands in her own.

"Hey, absolutely not. Eleven, you are stronger than every single

person in this house. Probably stronger than all of us combined. You can do things that no one else can. You've *survived* things most people can't imagine. Crying is just one more thing you can do, okay? It does not make you weak. Everyone cries. God, do you know how many times I've cried this week? And I cry about stupid things, like boys and fights with my friends."

"Friends are not stupid," said Eleven softly.

Christine sighed, and smiled. "You see, that's what I'm talking about. You say the smartest things, and you're twelve years old. When am I gonna be as smart as you?"

Eleven smiled, and looked down at her lap.

"Come on," Christine said bracingly. She stood up, and held out her hand. "Maybe you'll feel better if you eat. We can ask Mrs. Byers if she has any waffles, huh? Or you can take a nap, or take a shower. Both, probably. Even just some fluids should…El?"

She turned back in concern. Eleven had taken her hand, but she hadn't gotten up from the toilet. She was staring across the bathroom, down at the tap for the bathtub.

"Bath…"

"You wanna take a bath?" Christine asked, her brow furrowed.

"No. The bathtub. I can find them."

"Okay, I don't know what you mean."

But Eleven was already standing up. She took the lead instead, dragging Christine into the kitchen by their linked hands. They were just in time to catch the last few seconds of a hushed conversation.

"We just have to wait and try again," Mike was explaining.

Nancy scoffed. "Well, how long?"

"I don't know."

"The bath."

Everyone turned to look at Christine and Eleven, surprised by their appearance. Their eyes didn't seem to bother Eleven anymore.

"I can find them," she repeated steadily. "In the bath."

"What does she mean?" Hopper asked Christine. "In the bath?"

"I don't know," Christine said, shaking her head. "Maybe she needs water? I haven't seen her try it before."

"Water." Dustin was shaking a finger, turning to Hopper. "Didn't you ask if the gate was next to a tank of water?"

"The isolation tank," Hopper said darkly.

"Oh my God." Mrs. Byers gasped, and raised a hand over her mouth again. "That—That was for *her?"*

"Did they put you in there?" Hopper asked Eleven. "That tank?"

Eleven nodded.

"I was in the bath. When I opened the gate."

"Wait." Nancy raised a hand, looking wildly around the room. "She's the one who opened the gate?"

"Accident," Eleven said weakly.

Christine protectively stepped in front of her.

Hopper must've sensed the tension brewing. He stepped forward, holding up his hands like Christine might attack him for getting too close. He ducked down, and trying to get a better look at Eleven's face.

"What were you trying to do?" he asked, lowering his voice. "When the accident happened? Why did they put you in the bath?"

"Papa said, 'Make contact.'"

The look of horrified realization on Hopper's face was enough to make Christine's blood run cold.

"What does that mean?" Jonathan demanded as Hopper sank down into one of the chairs. "What did they mean, 'Make contact'?"

"I don't know," the chief sighed. "I don't know, the Upside Down? They probably started by looking for the Russians."

"The Russians?" Nancy repeated skeptically.

"Yeah. It's a military base. They develop weapons, spy tech, anything that can help us stay one step ahead of foreign invasion. And they've got a kid who can move things with her mind and track people through different dimensions? Yeah, I think they were trying to spy on the Russians."

"That woman," said Mrs. Byers, tapping Hopper on the arm. "She said they put her sister in isolation tanks to expand her mind. Do you don't think that's…?"

"That's exactly what I think," Hopper confirmed with a nod.

"You think what?" Lucas asked.

"What's an isolation tank?" asked Nancy.

It was Dustin who answered.

"It's like a big pool, with lots of salt water. The salt counteracts the weight of your body so you can float around and stuff."

"Yes," said Mrs. Byers, pointing at him. "That's exactly what she said. You—You lose all sense of feeling, so you feel alone in your mind. So you can focus."

"Yes." Eleven nodded. "Float. Then I can focus."

"Okay," said Mike hastily. "So where can we get an isolation tank?"

"Right," Hopper shot sarcastically. "Let's just bring her down to the station. I keep one of those in lock up."

"Well why don't we just make one?" asked Dustin. Everyone turned to stare at him, and he shrugged. "Why not? It's just water and salt, right? Keep it dark, keep it quiet, and Eleven does the rest herself."

"It can't be that easy," Christine said doubtfully. "I mean, that much salt alone…"

"How much would we need?" asked Lucas.

"I don't know. It would be…a *lot."*

"I have an idea," Dustin said excitedly, and he turned to Mrs. Byers. "Do you have a phonebook?"

"Um…yeah, sure, just…"

"Dustin, who are you trying to call?" Christine demanded.

"Mr. Clarke," he said, as though this was obvious. "Duh."

"It's ten o'clock on Saturday night, Dustin. You are not calling Mr. Clarke."

"Oh, cause you have a better idea?" he challenged. "How exactly do you plan on figuring out how much salt we need for a homemade isolation tank?"

"I don't know. Trial and error? The library?"

"Great idea," he said mockingly. "The library is *way* over there. And the phone is right here. Which one of us do you think could get an answer first?"

Christine glared at him. She frowned at Mrs. Byers. "Can he please have a phonebook?"

Several minutes and a handful of wrong numbers later, Dustin was standing with his ear to the phone. His face finally lit up with recognition.

"Mr. Clarke? It's Dustin… Yeah, Yeah. I just, I…I have a science question…"

There was a collective sigh around the room.

"Why did we let him do this?" Lucas whispered to Mike. "Why is *he* the one doing this?"

"Cause it was his idea. Now sh."

"Do you know anything about sensory deprivation tanks?" Dustin asked into the phone. "Specifically how to build one? …Fun…Hey, you always say we should never stop being curious! To always open any curiosity door we find! Why are you keeping this curiosity door locked?"

Christine pressed her face into her hands. She thought it was her groan that drew Dustin's gaze to her, but it was actually something much worse.

"No, we—we have supervision! Christine's babysitting! Here, I'll let you talk to her!"

Dustin thrust the phone at her, and Christine took a step back.

"No!" she hissed. "I don't—Dustin, just talk to him!"

"He wants to talk to you!" he hissed back. "Just talk to him! We need those instructions!"

Mike shoved Christine forward, and she grabbed the phone with a painful smile.

"Uh, hey, Mr. Clarke! Hey, I—I am so sorry. I told him not to call you, but…"

"Is everything alright, Christine?" Mr. Clarke asked.

"Yeah! It's totally fine. You know the boys, though. They get an idea in their heads and there's—there's just no stopping them. But uh, we were thinking—um—we were thinking that if the test went really well, we could use it for the…uh, science fair."

"The science fair?" It had caught his attention at least, and he sounded slightly less suspicious. *"With what kind of hypothesis?"*

"Oh. Um…we're going to test…the…effects of different foods on sensory concentration. Like, uh…you know how if you eat a lot of protein, or a lot of sugar before bed, it can affect your sleep cycle? I wanted to look at that. Obviously I'll have to control different variables, like age and exhaustion and hydration, but the boys agreed to be my first test subjects. Mostly so they can try and float."

"Christine, that is an incredibly interesting idea," Mr. Clarke complimented her. *"You never fail to surprise me. You should be really proud of yourself."*

"Yeah," she sighed in relief, shooting Dustin a thumbs up. "Yeah, right, I…thank you."

"How did you even come up with this?"

"Um…I was reading at the library. Found some old articles on CIA testing. You always said projects score better when there's validated research to go with them."

"I know. I wish they'd give you kids more points for creativity, but with a concept like that—I mean, you might even be able to go to state if…"

"The thing is we were hoping to get started tonight," Christine interrupted as Lucas waved her on. "I hate to bother you, but I can't find any ratio information anywhere. Dustin thought you might be able to help."

"Oh…well…I suppose for the science fair. Do you have a pencil?"

"Yes! Yes, I have a pencil!"

Mike scrambled up from his seat, thrusting a notepad at her and beaming. Christine began scribbling down numbers and ratios, Dustin peering over her shoulder. She pinned the phone to her ear and gave him a gentle punch on the shoulder. It had been a dumbass idea, but it was just dumb enough to work.